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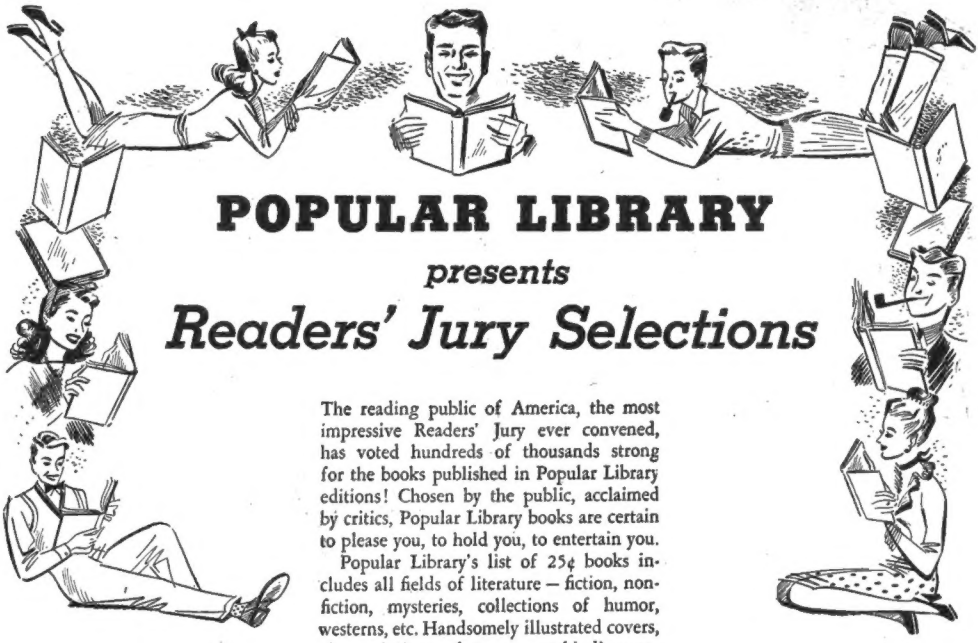

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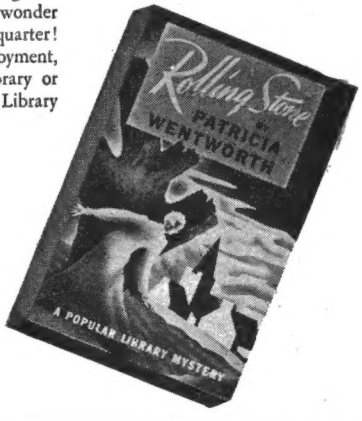

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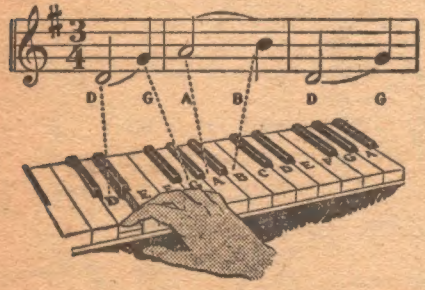

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 24, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION AUGUST, 1946

COMPLETE NOVEL

IRON MEN AND GOLD

by Jackson Cole

Dynamite and death follow the builders of a railroad when a vicious outlaw band battles to impede progress—and it's up to the Lone Wolf Ranger to clear the right of way! Follow Jim Hatfield on the perilous trail of sinister undercover schemers who plan a gigantic coup! 9

SHORT STORIES

THE KID AND HIS YELLOW DOG *by Tex Mumford* 68
Vengeful Brill Mason and Kink Bannock corner the old baker, Weejie Crane

SALTY STRANGER *by Sam Brant* 76
Sudden Sampson defends himself against murder accusation at Rocky Gulch

DOC SWAP'S LUCKY HORSESHOE *by Ben Frank* 80
The "tradin' hombre" trades himself into a showdown with Sheriff MacLoyd

FEATURES

THE FRONTIER POST *by Captain Starr* 6
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

SHAKE, PARDNER! *by Bill Anson* 72
The Texas Centennial commemorates a glorious century of real achievement!

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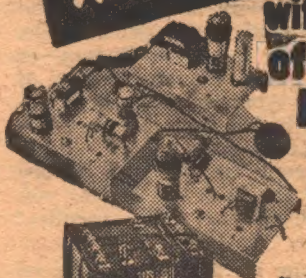

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HIYA, gals and galluses. I hear a heap o' gloomy talk nowadays as I make pasear up and down this western country. Seems as though the age of destruction is at hand. The atom bomb is only part of it.

First came DDT, which kills off wildlife and useful insects along with pests. Next I hear how they're rounding up and killing off wild horses—the last of the mustangs—from Texas west.

Out California way, fish and game authorities have started a program of destruction to kill off half of the sea lions that inhabit the scenic California coast, claiming that sea lions destroy food fish.

The Brighter Side

Of course there's a brighter side to what's going on. It's too bad we haven't got that great Westerner still with us, the one who told the world hard truth with a gentle smile.

I'm speakin' of the late Will Rogers—as though you didn't know. He was the last of the great homespun Americans, the cowboy-philosopher who whirled his way to everlasting fame with a lasso rope.

Will lived so recent that he isn't history yet. But died just far back enough so you younger Ranger-Clubbers don't recollect much about him.

The world lost one of its greatest citizens one misty Northland evening in 1935 when a red airplane crashed in the lonely, icy tundra fifteen miles from Point Barrow in Alaska. A lone Eskimo seal hunter saw the crash. Civilization was shocked days after to learn that Will Rogers and his friend, Wiley Post, globe-flying aviator, met their death in that accident.

Will was still a vigorous and adventure-loving man, 56 years old but seemed plenty younger. He was born in Indian Territory in 1879, where his father was a rancher and Indian trader.

Young Will became a tophand at 14, at which time he was sent away to military school in Missouri. Somehow, the Rogers boy was like a half-wild colt and he didn't take much to book education. He went from one school to another—"nearly every school in the country", he said later on. Once a teacher told him:

"Will, you always seem to know your lessons but I never see you study."

Will said:

"I've been in McGuffey's fourth-grade reader so long, ma'am, that I know it better than McGuffey does."

Out to See the World

After scattered schooling, he came back to his father's ranch and made $12,000 in cattle ranching by the time he was 21. He took the money and started out to see the world—along with a friend.

The two lads drifted down to Argentina. In one way and another, Will lost his money and went to work punching Argentine cattle for $4.20 a month.

He saw he couldn't get rich very fast at that, so came home—busted. Then he boarded a mule boat headed for Capetown, South Africa.

That was the beginning of a series of events that landed him in show business. When he got to South Africa, he went to a Wild West show at Johannesburg which was headed by a man known as Texas Jack.

In the performance, Texas Jack did a showy rope trick, telling his audience he'd give $100 to anybody who could match his trick.

Will, still broke, jumped at the chance to make $100. He hurried onto the stage and repeated the trick. Only to find out that Texas Jack was busted too. He couldn't give him any $100. But he gave Will a job in the show.

(Continued on page 89)

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I-I-T'S NOT HERE

JG

SO-O-O. THE DOUGH'S IN YOUR HOTEL ROOM, HUH? THEN SEND YOUR PAL HERE... AND HE'S GOT JUST 10 MINUTES OR ELSE...

I'LL GO, SON

MY SON GAMBLING WITH THUGS! THIS COULD MAKE A NASTY SCANDAL

IT WORKED! IT WORKED! AND HE SAID MY ACTING WOULDN'T FOOL A CHILD!

COME ON, NOW! A QUICK CHANGE AND A SHAVE BEFORE HE GETS BACK!

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HERE'S THE MON-- WHY, WHERE'S THAT THUG?

RIGHT HERE, DAD. THE MAN YOU SAID COULDN'T ACT—LARRY PHELPS!

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The tall stranger covered the Vinson twins with two unwavering guns (CHAPTER I)

IRON MEN AND GOLD

By JACKSON COLE

Dynamite and death follow the builders of a railroad when a desperate outlaw outfit battles to impede progress—and it's up to the Lone Wolf Ranger to clear the right of way!

CHAPTER I

Trail of Empire

AN ANNOYED coyote sat in a tuft of grass on a hilltop and yipped querulously as he caught from the air a stinging, pungent whiff that irritated his sensitive olfactory nerves. To make matters worse, the whiff had been accompanied by disquieting noise and startling light utterly foreign to anything the coyote had ever experienced until recent weeks.

He bitterly resented the advent of this thing of thunders and flashes and sneeze-provoking pungency. His luminous eyes reflected glints of moonlight as he glared down the hill at the gleaming twin ribbons that

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

RANGER HATFIELD CALLS A HALT TO THE

flowed out of the east and vanished into the west. He ran out a derisive red tongue, and his teeth gleamed like spikes of ivory as his thin lips curled up.

Far to the south, dim with distance, unreal in the deceptive moonlight, loomed the rugged battlements of the Chisos Mountains—the Phantoms—and beyond, the unseen gorge of the Rio Grande. East and west stretched the vast desolation of the Big Bend country of Texas, desert and hill and spire and chimney rock, its vegetation the cactus in a thousand species and varieties, the greasewood and the sage.

A wild land is the Big Bend, a land of mountain, canyon and mesa, a land of coarse chino grass, dagger and thorned brush. But there are great stretches of fine grazing land, abundantly watered, grown with needle and wheat grasses, and the curly mesquite rich in the spirit of the vast sun and the sweet rain of the dry country. Where beefs wax fat and sleek and horses acquire unequaled speed and endurance.

It is a land of story and tradition, the Big Bend. Here men bulk big and their deeds are outlandish. Its trails are shadowy. They slither furtively across the deadly deserts, dive into canyons, cling to the sides of precipices. Their stones are blackened with dried blood. Their dust is the dust of desiccated bones.

The things they have seen are unbelievable. The men they have known are beings riding the romance pages of a country where romance is the casual routine of the day's work. The Big Bend is a land where anything can happen, and usually does.

THE coyote was not alone in resenting the coming of the railroad to the Big Bend country. In the beamed and paneled living room of his great ranchhouse, old John Bruton, the lord of San Pedro, sat and glowered. The firelight struck rich, warm gleams from the mellow oak of the ceiling beams and the exquisitely carved paneling. It played over the passive features and powerful body of the cattle baron, glinted on his shock of iron-gray hair, glowed back from his cold gray eyes set beneath heavy brows and shaggy tufts.

John Bruton's Boxed B ranchhouse sat on a hill, surrounded by a grove of oaks that were already stately trees when Cabeza de Vaca—"Head of a Cow"—first wandered over Texas. The casa was much the same as when old Don Fernanda Gomez built it, in the days when Texas was still a part of the far-flung domain of the Spanish king. Through the wide window Bruton could gaze down into the rich San Pedro Valley where lay his dominion of broad acres, which for years he had ruled with the intolerant sway of a feudal baron, his sprawling ranchhouse a veritable "castle built at the crossroads" to exact tribute from all who came and went.

For years John Bruton had been a law unto himself. Nothing had shaken his serene self-confidence, nothing had been allowed to stand in his way. He had been supreme in the section, a very overlord to whom lesser "earls" and "barons" of the rangeland paid homage and tribute.

It was only recently that John Bruton had known disquietude. The coming of the railroad was responsible for that, the new railroad that was stretching steel fingers into the West, that had laid its iron arm across his empire.

It was not the mere physical advent that troubled Bruton. It was what it represented. It presaged, he knew, the coming of new men, of new ideas into his kingdom of the past. And into the soul of the lord of San Pedro was insidiously creeping a feeling that here were represented forces that he was powerless to combat, forces of progress, of vision, of the present seeing clearly the future, and turning its back on the grave-dust of the past.

John Bruton saw all this, dimly, as through a glass. All his life he had met and successfully conquered forces that were purely physical, had put down their encroachments with a strong hand. Now, in the full and fruitful evening of his life, this ominous shadow of things to come had crept between him and the warm sunlight of complacent achievement.

Not that John Bruton would for a moment admit that he might go down to defeat, might be forced to alter his way of living and thinking. No, this unthinkable thing should not be. No! He would hold and keep what

he had fought all his life to gain.

So John Bruton sat in his ranchhouse and glowered at the fire of crackling logs that burned on the wide hearth. His frown grew blacker as there came to his ears, thin with distance, an eerie wail. The voice that had disturbed the wild soul of the coyote, a voice equally hateful to the lord of San Pedro, the voice of the iron intruder that set at naught the distances and the desolation of the Big Bend.

JIM HATFIELD

Bruton abruptly got to his feet. He strode to the window, still moving with the lithe grace of a boy, despite his fifty-odd years. Standing with his columnar legs widespread, the firelight playing on his broad back, he stared across the dark valley toward the ragged crags of the Ladrones slashing the western skyline with claws of granite.

The Ladrones, folks said, were the stronghold of Black Bart Clanton and his outlaw band. Black Bart Clanton had many occupations, most of them decidedly lucrative. His chief business, it was said, was running wet cows across the Rio Grande, cows obtained from the vast herds of the Mexican hidalgos below the Line.

Black Bart pursued other interesting activities. He had sidelines of smuggling, stage robbery, wide-looping, and the like. Black Bart was a thoroughly unprincipled person and, in the opinion of John Bruton, the receptacle of all vices.

BLACK Bart had no more use for the new railroad than did his respectable neighbor. He clearly foresaw that its advent would in time seriously curtail his activities and might possibly result in his extermination. A railroad, and the settlers it would bring in, meant also the coming of law and order, a particularly iniquitous condition to Bart Clanton's way of thinking.

John Bruton was thinking of Black Bart Clanton at the moment. He stroked his forward-bristling beard meditatively, and there was a contemplative look in his cold eyes as he regarded the sinister ramparts of the Ladrones, the Robber Hills.

Suddenly his hard mouth shut tight like a rat-trap. He whirled about, strode to the front door and flung it wide. His raucous bellow brought immediate response. The door of the nearby bunkhouse banged open and a man strode forth. A moment later Bruton was talking earnestly and profanely to his foreman, Rance Wagner, a hardbitten old frontiersman with a lightning-fast gun-hand and a hair-trigger temper.

Wagner replied to the boss's harangue with grunts and monosyllables, as was customary with him. When Bruton finished talking, he dismissed the foreman with a forceful wave of his hand that seemed to propel Wagner physically out of the ranchhouse. Then, with a satisfied grunt, he seated himself before the fire again, charged a black pipe with blacker tobacco and sat exhaling clouds of smoke, an exultant gleam in his cold eyes.

Meanwhile, Wagner had barked an order into the bunkhouse. The result was that, two minutes later, Wagner and two reckless young cowhands—the Vinson twins, Tom and Jerry—were slapping rigs onto their horses.

Folks said that wherever the Vinson boys showed up, sooner or later there was a fight, a frolic, or a foot race. They were cold propositions, long, lean, dangerous men with glittering black eyes set deep beneath craggy brows.

With the cool, calculating Wagner as a leader, they made a disquieting trio to buck up against.

Stirrup to stirrup the Boxed B hands rode through the moonlight, headed for Cordy, what had once been a sleepy cowtown. Now, since the C & P Railroad had turned it into a distributing center for the construction further west, it was a roarer.

It was the habit of Rance Wagner and the Vinson twins to ride with loose rein and busy spur. They did not slacken speed when they swept into the town from the east. They took the corner into the main street at a dead run, Wagner slightly in the lead.

Tom Vinson gave a yelp of alarm and jerked his horse to the left, colliding with his brother's mount and nearly resulting in a spill for both.

Directly in front of Rance Wagner's racing black had loomed a great golden horse coming briskly down the street from the west.

There was no time to prevent the head-on collision. But as Wagner's cayuse stiffened his legs to slither to a halt, the voice of the rider of the great sorrel rang out like a bugle call of sound.

"Trail, Goldy!"

Instantly the sorrel lunged forward, putting all his great weight into the meeting. The result of the split-second thinking on the part of his rider was an instant reversal of advantage in the sorrel's favor. His shoulder hit the black solidly in the ribs. Wagner's horse went down in a flurry of splaying hoofs. His rider was hurled clear and thudded into the dust of the street.

In a bewildering flash of movement, the sorrel's rider dismounted. He strode to the fallen Boxed B foreman, extending a helping hand.

But Rance Wagner was boiling with rage, his tough old body not in the least injured by the fall. He leaped to his feet, rasping curses, and launched a wicked blow at the other man's face.

The rider of the sorrel, towering over Wagner, who was himself a six-footer and more, did not move his feet. His powerful body swayed gracefully aside and Wagner's fist whizzed over his shoulder. Almost at the same instant, something like the slim, steel face of a sledgehammer took Wagner squarely on the angle of his jaw.

THE Boxed B foreman lifted from his feet and shot through the air as if he had suddenly sprouted wings. He thudded back into the dust from which he had bounced, and this time he stayed there.

The Vinson twins gave simultaneous yells of anger. Their hands flashed down with bewildering speed. But even as they gripped the handles of their irons, they froze grotesquely, their faces strained and whitening. They were staring into the unwavering black muzzles of two long guns that "just happened" in the tall stranger's hands.

"One down!" a cool, musical voice said to them. "Want to make it three?"

The Vinson brothers didn't. They were not afraid of anything that walked, crawled, hopped or flied, but they were a long way from being fools. They knew they wouldn't have a chance. Their hands dropped from their guns.

"That's better," said the tall man. "I don't see any reason for startin' fangin'. That gent who's gettin' his senses back asked for it, and got it."

The Vinson boys started to speak, but were interrupted by the voice of Rance Wag-

The drygulchers were rapidly closing the gap as Hatfield sent Goldy headlong through the brush (CHAPTER VIII)

ner, who was rising to his feet, rubbing his jaw.

"Reckon the gent is right," said Wagner. "We were to blame for that bust-up, not him." He glanced at the tall stranger with grudging admiration.

"Feller," he said, "when you hit a man, he's hit! No hard feelin's though, and here's my hand on it. Name's Wagner—Rance. Them two young hellions is the Vinson twins, Tom and Jerry. Tom's the one yuh think is Jerry but ain't."

"Glad to know yuh, Wagner," the tall man acknowledged. "Hatfield's the name, front handle whittled down to Jim."

They shook hands gravely. Wagner opened his mouth to speak again.

"Say," Hatfield suddenly interrupted "what's rilin' the Law so?"

A bulkily fat man was stamping toward them, his handlebar mustache bristling in his scarlet face. He was wheezing loudly and evidently in a bad temper. On his sagging vest gleamed a big nickel badge with "Sheriff" engraved on its twinkling surface. He halted directly in front of Hatfield and glared up belligerently at his sternly handsome face.

"Here you!" he squeaked. "Yuh can't come bargin' into this town this way and knock folks down, not while I'm sheriff."

Hatfield smiled down at him, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face.

"Plumb sorry, Sheriff," he drawled. "Reckon I must have been mistaken."

"Mistaken about what?" squeaked the sheriff.

"Why, I plumb thought I did knock the gent down, but if you say I can't do that, I reckon I was mistaken."

The sheriff gawked and sputtered.

"Let me tell yuh—" he began.

"Oh, button yore lip, Neale," interrupted Rance Wagner. "Yuh're always pawin' sod about somethin'. This gent and me smoked the pipe. Everything is cinched up proper. Come along, let's twine our cayuses at the rack here and all drop over to the Posthole for a drink. Hatfield, this rambunctious gent packin' the tallow is Sheriff Neale Dawson. He's all right, but he don't take enough dallies on his temper and is always goin' off the deep end. Come on, Neale. The way yuh're snortin' and pawin' anybody'd think yuh figger this gent to be Black Bart Clanton hisself. Let's go!"

CHAPTER II

Alley Drygulch

THE Boxed B punchers and Hatfield tethered their horses and crossed the street to where the windows of the saloon blazed golden. Inside was a crowded room that was doing a roaring business.

"A new place," Wagner observed to Hatfield, who walked beside him. "Feller by the name of Lee, Kearney Lee, opened it up just before the railroad decided to make the pueblo a terminal. He must have had some inside information. Folks were sort of flabbergasted when he set up business, but right off came the announcement that the road was goin' to build shops and roundhouses here and a big yard."

"Must have been a surprise," observed Hatfield.

"Yeah," said the foreman, "the regular places were caught flatfooted. Several new ones opened up in the past six months, and some of the old ones expanded, but Lee got the best business. Most of the hands from the spreads to the north and east drop in here, as well as most of the railroad's top-hands. Other gents drop in, too, but about them the least said the better. Look! Every poker table is crowded, both roulette wheels buzzing like bees in a bottle, the dance floor jammed and yuh have to fight yore way to the bar." He nudged Hatfield and nodded toward a man at the bar. "There's Lee now, standin' at the far end. Right peart lookin' jigger, don't yuh think?"

Hatfield did think so. He was impressed by Kearney Lee, a tall finely set-up man with piercing black eyes and hair as black as Hatfield's own. He moved with a panther-like grace. His hands were finely formed and immaculately cared for. His face was devoid of tan, but nevertheless had a healthy outdoors look. He nodded affably to Wagner as the foreman and his companions found places at the bar near where he was standing, but did not speak.

Wagner ordered drinks. A jolly-faced barkeep with a prodigious mustache and an intriguing spit curl plastered down over his forehead attended to their wants with easy efficiency. Sheriff Dawson gulped his drink, and the Vinson brothers also swallowed

theirs without delay. Hatfield and Wagner sipped theirs.

"'Scuse me a minute," the Boxed B foreman remarked a moment later. "There's a jigger over there I want to talk to."

He crossed the room and accosted an extremely tall and broad-shouldered individual who lounged near the faro bank watching the play. As Wagner came up, the man turned and Hatfield saw that he had a lean, swarthy face with a prominent high-bridged nose, a hard mouth and conspicuous cheekbones. His hair was black, but his eyes, in startling contrast to his dark coloring, were pale blue, verging on gray.

"That's Blaine Carnes," observed the sheriff, who was in a more amiable frame of mind after a snort of red-eye. "He come here six or seven months ago from over in the Nueces country. Set up a haulin' business and got a contract with the railroad to supply cross-ties for the new line. They cut 'em up to the north and freight 'em down here. Reckon Carnes is makin' hisself a good thing. Funny sort of cuss. Keeps to hisself most of the time. Him and Wagner got kind of chummy some way or other. Both old-timers, though Rance is a heap older than Carnes, I figure. Guess Rance's a few years past fifty. Carnes is ten years younger anyway, mebbe more, but he ain't no chicken."

While the sheriff was rambling on, Hatfield's abnormally keen ears were catching a conversation carried on in low tones by the Vinson brothers, who stood at the bar a little distance away.

"Yuh never seen Black Bart Clanton, did yuh, Tom?" Jerry was saying. The other twin shook his head.

"I never did, either," observed Jerry, "but I've knowed folks who got a glimpse of him. Sort of interestin', the way they said he looks."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. Nigh onto six and a half feet tall, wide as a barn door. Got a hawk nose and gray eyes. Plumb pizen with guns. Funny, ain't it?"

HATFIELD caught a flicker of eyes in his direction, and heard Tom Vinson say:

"This feller's eyes ain't gray, Jerry. They're green."

"Uh-huh, but green eyes look gray sometimes. They looked about the color of ice with snow blowin' across it when he lined sights with us a bit ago, and did they look plumb bad! Give me the creeps."

"Yuh're always seein' things or imaginin' things, Jerry," Tom Vinson deprecated. "Now, don't go blabbin' anything like that around."

"Oh, I ain't sayin' nothin', except to you," the other twin replied quickly. "But yuh can't blame a feller for wonderin'."

Hatfield's rather wide mouth twitched slightly at the corners as he stifled a grin. He turned his attention to Sheriff Dawson, who was still rambling on in his squeaky voice.

After a few minutes, Wagner and Blaine Carnes, the freighter, left the saloon. Wagner jerked a nod to the Vinson twins, which was evidently understood.

Hatfield and the sheriff had another drink together. As they elbowed to the bar, Kearney Lee, the Posthole owner, strolled up and joined them, speaking to the sheriff. Dawson introduced Hatfield. Lee shook hands with a steely grip and acknowledged the introduction in a modulated voice. He ordered one on the house.

"Doin' a good business here, I'd say," remarked Hatfield.

Lee nodded.

"She'll boom tomorrow," he predicted. "Tomorrow is pay-day on the railroad and the boys will all be in to whoop things up."

Sheriff Dawson gave a disgusted snort.

"No holiday for me," he complained. "There'll be ruckus-raisin' a-plenty before the night's over. Seems there ain't never no peace hereabouts any more. I— Good gosh!"

Outside the saloon had sounded a roar of gunfire, and a shrill scream. It was followed almost instantly by a confused shouting.

"Come on!" barked the sheriff. "Somethin's busted loose already!"

He pounded to the door, with Hatfield and the Vinson brothers close on his heels. Kearney Lee watched them go with a contemplative eye. He lifted his brimming glass in a slim, white hand, held it a moment without sloshing a drop over the rim, and then drank it with enjoyable deliberation.

Outside the saloon, men were running from all directions, shouting and gesticulating. Only a door or two from the Posthole was an unlighted alley, and in the mouth of this alley, where it opened onto the street, lay the body of a man, face downward in the dust.

"Another one!" squeaked the sheriff, and swore a blue streak.

He and Hatfield knelt beside the fallen man and turned him over on his back. The sheriff gave a gulp in his throat as he stared at the blood-streaked face.

"Good glory, it's Henry Hartsook, the railroad's assistant superintendent of construction!" panted the sheriff. "The hellions must have drygulched him out of the alley."

Hatfield glanced quickly toward the narrow opening between two blank walls, and at the same instant hurled himself backward, hands streaking to his guns.

From the black depths of the alley gushed a stream of fire. The sheriff squalled like a cactus-pricked tomcat as a bullet flecked a patch of skin from the end of his nose. He yelled again as both of Hatfield's guns let go with a rattling crash, sweeping the alley from side to side with a stream of lead.

Thumbs hooked over the hammers of his Colts, Hatfield strained his ears, deafened for the moment by the roar of his own guns. He heard a pounding of steps receding into the alley. He bounded to his feet and, weaving and ducking, raced in pursuit.

He was perhaps a score of yards inside the alley when something caught him a terrific blow just below his knees. He sailed through the air and came to the ground with a thud, all the breath knocked out of him. Instinctively he writhed away from where he had landed, his guns, upon which he had kept a tenacious grip, jutting out in front of him. He thought he heard a sound farther down the alley, and sent three swift shots in its direction. He shifted position even as he pulled trigger, and again lay listening.

ALL was silent, save for the high-pitched bellowing of Sheriff Dawson in the mouth of the alley. He heard the sheriff's boots pounding toward him, and heard his wheezing breath.

"Game little rooster, all right," Hatfield chuckled as he rubbed his bruised shins. "Headin' right into the shindig regardless. Powder smoke don't faze him." He lifted his head and called to the sheriff: "Careful! There's a rope stretched across the alley. Look out, or yuh'll take a header over it like I did."

He heard Sheriff Dawson squawking profanity as he reached the obstruction. There was a note of injured indignation in the lawman's voice that caused Hatfield to chuckle again. Ejecting the spent shells from his guns and replacing them with fresh cartridges, he drifted silently down the alley on the chance that he had downed one of the drygulchers. But he found nothing, except that soon there were open spaces between rows of dark shacks and 'dobes that fronted the alley on either side.

"Plenty of places for the hellions to duck into," he muttered as he returned to meet the sheriff. "Nervy sidewinders! Waited after they had downed that poor devil, evidently expectin' somebody they hoped to get a shot at to come to him. Just who did they expect, I wonder?"

He met Dawson at the rope, and returned with him to the alley mouth.

"Fixed it beforehand so they could be shore to make a get-away," he observed to the peace officer. "Figgered anybody who came bargin' into the alley after 'em would turn a flip-flop over that rope."

Sheriff Dawson proffered profane agreement and added that the "sidewinders were plumb pizenous!"

Several men were bending over the stricken construction superintendent.

"He ain't dead, Neale," one of them told the sheriff, "but he looks to be in a mighty bad way. Hole through the top of his head."

"Carry him into the Posthole," Dawson directed. "Bill Wilson, you hustle over to Doc McChesney's office and fetch the doc. Lend a hand, Hatfield."

Putting the sheriff aside, Hatfield picked up the bulky form of the wounded man, apparently without effort. Cradling him gently in his arms he carried him into the saloon and laid him on a couple of tables that had hurriedly been pushed together by swampers.

Kearney Lee, composed, immaculate, strolled over and glanced down into the stricken man's face.

"That makes five or six, doesn't it, Dawson?" he observed.

"Uh-huh, five, all of 'em key men in the railroad's organization," sputtered the sheriff. "At this rate, they'll never get that cussed road built. It's as much as a man's life is worth to take an important job with the double-blasted outfit."

Hatfield glanced quickly at Lee's composed face, but said nothing. Then the white-bearded old frontier doctor arrived.

"We'll pack him over to the hospital," he decided after a swift examination of the man's injury. "No, I can't say whether he'll

pull through, not yet. He's bad hurt. Who did it?"

A curious silence greeted the question. Men glanced at one another, but apparently no one saw fit to reply, until the cool voice of Kearney Lee broke the sudden quiet.

"Two guesses," said Lee. "For one, I'd say Black Bart Clanton and his outfit."

"And the other?" Hatfield asked quickly.

Lee shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'm not naming names until I'm sure," he replied. "By the way, where is Rance Wagner and his friend, Blaine Carnes? Weren't they in here a little while ago?"

"Lee, yuh don't mean yuh're accusin' Rance of havin' somethin' to do with this?" one of the Vinson brothers asked hotly.

Kearney Lee favored the young fellow with a cool look.

"You're the one who brought that subject up," he remarked.

YOUNG Vinson flushed darkly, and his hand started to drop toward his gun butt. Kearney Lee did not move, nor take his unwavering gaze from Vinson's face, but Hatfield saw the fingers of his right hand spread clawlike, until they resembled the talons of a bird of prey. At the same instant the man's left hand, almost casually, caressed the left lapel of his long black coat.

"Shoulder holster man," Hatfield told himself, recognizing the gesture of the gunman who swings his coat aside to draw from the armpit. "Shoulder holster man, fast and plumb deadly."

With apparent thoughtlessness he stepped between the Vinson boys and the saloonkeeper. Kearney Lee smiled thinly, and there was an almost amused expression in his flashing black eyes. Tom Vinson fumbled his hand, and grunted something under his breath. His brother Jerry visibly relaxed.

A stretcher was hastily improvised with mop poles thrust through coat sleeves. On it, the wounded construction man, Henry Hartsook, was packed off to the hospital. Just as he was being lifted onto the stretcher, Rance Wagner, the Boxed B foreman, and Blaine Carnes, the freighter, hurried in, breathing as if they had walked swiftly.

Smoke wisped from the Ranger's rifle, while guns crackled on the canyon floor (CHAPTER XII)

"We heard somethin' happened!" Wagner called out.

"Reckon everybody in town did," grunted the sheriff. "Let's go, boys, 'fore this jigger cashes in."

Hatfield waited until the sheriff returned to the Posthole. Then, on Dawson's recommendation, he got Goldy a comfortable stall in a nearby livery stable, and was himself accommodated with a small but comfortable and clean room over the stalls.

"Feel I could stand a mite of shut-eye," he told Sheriff Dawson. "Didn't sleep any last night."

"I feel the same way," grunted the lawman. "I won't get any tomorrow night, either, seein' as tomorrow's pay-day. Be trouble a-plenty bustin' here in the next twenty-four hours."

Before going to bed, Hatfield carefully cleaned and oiled his guns. His green eyes were thoughtful, and the concentration furrow was deep between his black brows.

"What I'd like to know," he told the sixes, having the habit of talking to his horse, or even his guns, as is not unusual with men who ride much alone, "is whether that slug from the alley was meant for me or for the sheriff. It lifted a patch of skin from Dawson's nose, but it passed through the air where my back was a split second before."

CHAPTER III

Pay-Day in Cordy

WHEN James G. "Jaggers" Dunn, empire builder, placed his finger on the map of Texas and said, "The road goes through here," his advisers and board of directors threw up their hands in consternation.

"Build a railroad over the Ladrones!" they exclaimed. "It can't be done!"

But the general manager and principal stockholder of the great C & P system had reached a frame of mind they knew well. He would listen to no reason, or what they thought was reason.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the new line to Alpen is being largely financed by local capital put into the project by mine and ranch owners of the section the line will traverse. They believe it is possible for the line to cross the Ladrones. If they are willing to risk their money on the project, I am willing to go along with them, and risk my reputation."

"But the outlay will be tremendous," protested Dave Barrington, secretary and treasurer of the board. "To turn north and skirt the hills would be greatly cheaper."

"Dave," replied Dunn, "I took over the C and P when it was nothing but two short streaks of rust and going in debt deeper all the time. I built it to what it is by gambling on long chances. I'm willing to keep on gambling, for high stakes. By going over, or through, the Ladrones at the point I have decided upon, we will save more than two hundred haulage miles. Think what that will mean when we really begin hauling freight from the West. We will have the shortest, straightest route and the easiest grade of any Southern transcontinental line."

"And if we don't get through on time, and the T and W beats us to Alpen, we'll lose those Government mail and express contracts we're hoping for," Barrington returned grimly.

"We'll take a chance," replied the imperturbable Jaggers Dunn. "The road goes through!"

Looking into the frosty blue eyes set under the big domelike forehead surmounted by its glorious mane of crinkly white hair, Barrington had a feeling that, despite Hades and high water, the road would go through.

The C & P began building railroad, and soon Jaggers Dunn and his army of workers ran into utterly unexpected difficulties. To the granite forces of Nature was added the deliberate opposition of man. Trains were wrecked, buildings were burned, camps raided, jobs bungled, machinery sabotaged.

Finally began a reign of terror. Key men of the organization were ruthlessly slain or seriously wounded. Drygulching became the recognized order of the day.

The great San Pedro Valley resolved into armed camps, one headed by John Bruton and aided and abetted by the outlaws of the Ladrone hills, who mutually looked upon the coming of the railroad as the ultimate evil. The other, ably led by young Larry Hodge, was as firmly convinced that the event would be a boon to the section and something greatly to be desired.

The ultimate development was an urgent letter written by Jaggers Dunn to his old

friend, Captain Bill McDowell, head of the Franklin post of the Texas Rangers. Captain Bill, after sundry remarks that were novel and forceful, dispatched Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf, his lieutenant and top-man, to the scene of trouble, the focus of wrath of which was Cordy, the new C & P terminal.

"Dunn wants a troop to keep order," Captain Bill told Hatfield, "but I ain't got no troop to spare right now. Give things a once-over, Jim, and straighten me out."

After which Captain McDowell dismissed the matter from his mind, confident that things would soon be "straightened out" in a manner satisfactory to the law-abiding, and unpleasant to those who set justice and order at naught. But he handed Hatfield what was a tall order even for the Lone Wolf.

Early as it was when Jim Hatfield arose, the day after his arrival in Cordy, the main street was already black with men. More long trains of flat cars were rolling from the west, each disgorging its load of turbulent humanity.

THE construction workers were not the only ones in for the pay-day celebration. Lithe young cowboys from the spreads of the San Pedro Valley raced their horses along the street, aiding and abetting the wind sweeping up from the Perdida Desert, onto which the south mouth of the valley opened, in raising clouds of white dust that sprinkled the crowds jostling on the board sidewalks. Already the saloons were doing a good business, although it was nothing to what was to come later in the day when the pay car arrived and began handing out the fortune in gold that would burn holes in the pockets of the workers until it was spent.

Shopkeepers stood in their open doorways, alert and expectant. Waxy-faced dealers in sober black, relieved only by the snow of their shirt fronts, sat behind stacks of chips at the gaming tables. Shirt-sleeved bartenders polished glasses behind the gleaming bars. Dance-floor girls gathered in groups, chattering noisily, their too-bright eyes gleaming with anticipation, too-ready smiles on their too-red lips. The lunch counters were crowded with men who preferred to line their stomachs with food before getting down to the important business of drinking.

At present, the cowhands, who had already been paid off, were the chief patrons. But soon they would be outnumbered by the construction workers, ten to one.

Sprinkled among the crowd were individuals who looked like cowhands but, Jim Hatfield quickly decided, were not. These were the men who caused Sheriff Dawson to tug his handlebar mustache and swear in more special deputies.

"If them hellions don't pull somethin' before the night is over, I'll be a heap mistook," he said to "Ladder" Lane, his chief deputy. "Buzzards in from the hills, lookin' for carcasses to pick, that's what they are."

"And ready to make carcasses to pick, if need be," replied Ladder.

Ladder Lane was built like a snake on stilts. He had hound dog chops, sad brown eyes, and looked mild and harmless, but wasn't.

After a hearty breakfast, Hatfield strolled to the railroad station, where the crowd was thickest. Every eye there was turned to the east, where the twin steel ribbons of the railroad stretched into the distance until the parallel lines seemed to meet.

The crowd was in a hilarious mood. There was much horse play, jostling, good-natured chaff. Men talked largely of what they were going to do with the money that soon would be in their hands. Good resolutions were made, and predictions that they would not be kept. Eyes gleamed with anticipation. Voices held exhilarated notes.

Suddenly a shout went up, that swelled to a roar. Far off to the east a black dot had appeared, crowned by a dark and wavering plume.

"Here comes our money!" bawled a brawny tracklayer. "Line up, boys! Paa-a-ay dirt!"

Swiftly the black dot grew and took shape. A humming vibrated the rails, a low mutter became apparent. The mutter increased to a staccato crackling, undertoned by the rumble of speeding wheels. A spurt of steam soared over the boiler of the locomotive.

Seconds later the eerie wail of a whistle reached the crowd. It was answered by whoops and bellows. The pounding engine and its single car gleamed in the sunlight, rocking and swaying over the poorly ballasted track. A switchman twirled a lever, a white marker flashed red. There was a sudden cutting-off of the hammering exhaust, a trailing cloud of smoke that shot upward again as the roar of the blower quivered the air.

The pony trucks of the locomotive took the switch points, the engine lurched and

swayed. There was a clanging of brake rigging, a screeching of shoes on the tires. With a creaking of curbed steel, a bellow from the rising safety valve, and a banging of couplers, the pay-car came to a halt on the spur beside the station.

Armed guards descended and took up their posts. The pay-car doors opened, the brass grilled windows banged up. A steady stream of men began filing in one door and out the other. Pay-day at Cordy was a reality.

SHOPKEEPERS and the lunch counters were the first to reap the golden harvest. But soon the long bars were jammed, the gaming tables were crowded. The whine of fiddles and the twang of guitars resounded. Boot heels began clumping on the dance floors. The clink of gold pieces on the "mahogany" echoed the sprightly clinking of bottle necks on glass rims.

The rumble of voices crescendoed, was interspersed by shouts and the bawling of what was intended for song. More trains boomed in from the west. The main street became more and more crowded with a jostling throng that overflowed the board sidewalks and churned the dust to a gray cloud flecked with sunlight glints of gold.

Jim Hatfield, sauntering along carelessly, towering over the men who rubbed elbows with him, surveyed the scene with a quickened pulse.

"I've seen the elephant before, but this bids to be tops before she's finished," he mused.

His attention was distracted by a clatter of horses' irons. Riding up the main street was a compact body of men, evidently cowhands. At their head was a great lion of a man with a powerful, muscle-packed face, cold gray eyes and a mane of grizzled hair flowing from under the wide brim of his black J.B.

The big man sat his powerful gray horse solidly, his broad back ramrod-straight. He looked neither to right nor left, and took little heed of the men in the street who hurriedly got out of his way. His followers rode with sober faces, but their eyes glinted suspiciously, seemingly searching the faces of the crowd as they passed.

"That's John Bruton, who owns the Boxed B Ranch," said a voice at Hatfield's elbow. "They call him the lord of San Pedro. Fine-lookin' feller, ain't he?"

Hatfield nodded agreement, glancing down at the fresh-faced young cowhand who was regarding the cattle baron with an expression of awe.

The cowboy turned as a fresh drumming of hoofs sounded.

"Good gosh!" he exclaimed. "And here comes Larry Hodge and his Bar H bunch. If them two get together, gentlemen, hush!"

Following the direction of his gaze, Hatfield saw half a dozen horsemen just rounding the corner. Riding some paces ahead of his men was a lithe, slender young man with laughing, reckless blue eyes, and crisp golden hair that curled from under his pushed-back hat.

He had a prominent nose and a firm chin. His features were too irregular for genuine good looks, but there was a charm about his lean face that was ample recompense for its lack of classical contours. His slenderness was the slenderness of a rapier blade, and he sat his mettlesome black horse with careless grace. There was something so jaunty and debonair about him that Hatfield unconsciously smiled, and his green eyes mirrored instinctive approval.

"All steel wire and whipcord," he mused. "What a cavalry leader he'd make!"

The Boxed B outfit passed to hitch their horses at a rack across the street. Then they diagonaled through the dust to the swinging doors of the Posthole and vanished into the saloon. Hodge and his Bar H men rounded the next corner.

"They always put up their cayuses at the K.V. corral down to the end of Pisano Street," said the cowboy at Hatfield's side. "They mostly do their drinkin' at Old Man Mosby's Four Sixes, but they sometimes drop into the Posthole. If they do today—well, there mebbe'll be a nice ruckus."

Hatfield's eyes were thoughtful as he continued his walk. If the two outfits that evidently were the heads of the rival factions in the San Pedro Valley should get together, there was no telling what would happen. Such a situation, Hatfield well knew, was as inflammable as gun powder, and just as conducive to explosive results.

What is more, the Ranger knew that he would be drawn into the holocaust. This was something he wished to avoid. He could not take sides. It would ruin his chances to get at the bottom of the trouble pestering the railroad. He had to stand alone.

Yet something told Jim Hatfield that he could not avoid mixing in the feud.

CHAPTER IV

Dynamite!

AS JIM HATFIELD visited the various saloons, in Cordy, he comprehended a situation peculiar to such a celebration as was under way in the town. The railroad workers were wholeheartedly enjoying their pay-day holiday, but with the riders for the various spreads it was different.

Hatfield sensed a tense watchfulness in their bearing that was foreign to a pay-day "bust." Groups kept forming, the members talking together in low tones and drinking sparingly. The players at the poker tables had a preoccupied air and appeared to be paying more attention to what was going on around them than to their cards. In fact, the whole town seemed sort of holding its breath in uneasy anticipation.

A group drinking quietly in the Posthole held the Lone Wolf's interest. They were, for the most part, husky, hard-eyed, watchful men garbed in corduroys and high-laced boots. They had a rugged, out-door look about them but were different from the cowhands and the brawny construction workers who appeared so carefree.

"Them fellers over there are Blaine Carnes' freighters," observed a sociable bartender, noticing the direction of the Lone Wolf's gaze. "They mostly stick together and don't mix much. Quiet bunch and hold their likker well, but I've a notion they could be plenty salty if necessary. Most of 'em pack guns under their coats and look like they'd know how to use 'em. There's Carnes over there at the bit table, talkin' to John Bruton, the big feller with the gray hair, and Rance Wagner, Bruton's foreman."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on the group at the table. John Bruton was pounding the table top with a ponderous fist. His face was flushed, his aggressive tuft of beard bristling forward on his stubborn chin. His deep rumble came to the Ranger:

"Carnes, yuh're helpin' the cussed railroad get through, and yuh know it! Yuh don't have to haul ties for 'em."

Then Carnes's reply, his voice hard and clear, in its tones something of the timbre of hammered steel:

"Bruton, I don't want the road to get through any more than you do! Look what it'll do to my freightin' business. But I keep my feet on the ground. I aim to get what I can out of a bad bargain. If I don't haul their ties, somebody else will. Why shouldn't I make what I can out of 'em? I don't see any sense in pawin' the hackamore. Yuh can't stop the road."

He paused, then made a remark that caused Hatfield's black brows to draw together.

"Bruton," he said significantly, "if yuh wanted to catch a pike, yuh wouldn't use a pin-hook."

John Bruton seemed struck by the expression. He stared at Carnes.

"Never heard that before, but it aims to make sense," he rumbled. "A pike's a right big fish, ain't it?"

"It is, and it's a fighter," replied Carnes. "Yuh need a big hook, and plenty of savvy to land one."

Bruton nodded, tugging at his mustache. Hatfield, glancing aside at the moment, saw the immaculate Kearney Lee standing not

[*Turn page*]

far from the table, on his clear-cut features an expression of cynical amusement.

Hatfield suddenly turned to the bartender, who was refilling his glass.

"Bruton and Carnes both old-timers in this section?" he asked.

"Old John is," the drink juggler replied. "Born and raised hereabouts, and his pa before him. Carnes is a sort of newcomer. I understand he's from the Panhandle country —born and brought up there. The blizzards busted him out of the cow business and he drifted down this way and set up his freightin' business."

"And now the railroad may put him out of it?" said Hatfield.

The barkeep shook his head. "Carnes is smart. It looked like the railroad was going to put him out of business like the blizzards did, but he managed to get in with 'em. Got a contract to haul cross-ties from the woods up north of here. He freights stuff across the hill trail for 'em, too, over to where they're cuttin' through the hills from the west. Yuh see, they're drivin' that cut from both ways. Aim to bore a long tunnel through the main ridge and meet in the middle. Takes some fancy figgerin', don't it, to make two ends of a tunnel meet like that?"

JIM HATFIELD who, before the murder of his father by wideloopers had sent him into the Rangers, had had three years in a famous college of engineering, nodded thoughtful agreement.

Before noon, all the workers at the western camp had arrived in town. Hatfield was surprised to see another train booming across the valley. He walked slowly toward the end of the main street and watched its approach. He heard the chuckle of the exhaust swell and deepen, the low rumble become a grinding roar.

Abruptly the exhaust was shut off, the couplers clanked together as the train quickly lost speed. The engine lurched around a final curve and rolled along the straight stretch of track that ran close to the walls of the new roundhouse. The switch to the lead that led to the yards flashed red, the engineer slackened the speed still more with a light application of his air-brakes.

The slowing locomotive was in the shadow of the roundhouse wall, nosing its way to the switch. Hatfield could see the engineer leaning out of the cab, one hand on the brake handle. The fireman stood in the gangway between the engine and the tender, gazing out over the town.

Without the slightest warning a cloud of yellow smoke gushed from under the locomotive. There was a deafening roar, a rending of metal and a rumble of cascading bricks. Through the turmoil knifed a scream of agony, cut off short.

Through the billowing smoke cloud, Hatfield, half stunned by the shock of the explosion, saw the locomotive actually rise in the air. It careened off the tracks and turned over. An instant later there was a second thundering roar as the boiler exploded.

Huge chunks of steel whizzed through the air. A small building near the tracks was torn to pieces by a section of the hurtling boiler. More bricks flew wildly from the shattered roundhouse. A cloud of steam streaked through the smoke and for an instant all details of the catastrophe were blotted out.

The smoke and steam swiftly dissipated, however. Hatfield saw that where the tracks had been a moment before was a wide and deep crater, still wisping smoke. One whole side of the roundhouse had been torn away. The roof sagged crazily on its splintered beams. The turntable had been blown from its pivot and lay, smashed and twisted, in the pit. Of the fireman and engineer nothing was to be seen.

The town was in a turmoil of near panic. Crowds boiled from the saloons and eating places, shouting, yelling, gesticulating. Nobody knew at the moment what had happened. Soon, however, the scene of the disaster was packed by a milling throng that stared into the crater hollowed out by the explosion, bawled questions, swore luridly.

Jim Hatfield, his eyes as coldly gray as wind-swept ice, shouldered his way to the front. A score of paces distant from the track he spotted a portion of the mangled body of the engineer. The fireman was apparently nothing but scattered fragments. Parts of the locomotive were strewn in every direction. Splintered cross-ties and twisted rails lay about.

Sheriff Dawson came burrowing through the crowd, with him a white-faced man whom Hatfield later learned was the shop superintendent.

"Dynamite!" the sheriff was shrilling, his ridiculously high-pitched voice like the squall of an angry tomcat. "The hellions

planted dynamite under the rails and set it off when the train came along."

"But it couldn't be!" the superintendent was protesting. "The track is patrolled all the time, and this section along here, and the yards, are watched every minute of the night and day. How could anybody have worked here long enough to plant dynamite?"

"There's the evidence before yore eyes," the sheriff pointed out grimly.

Glancing about, he caught sight of Hatfield's towering form.

"Did you see what happened?" he demanded. "There was an explosion before the biler let go, wasn't there?"

"There was," Hatfield replied. "It was dynamite, all right. Couldn't have been anything else. It let go under the engine. The boiler didn't cut loose until after the engine turned over."

"What did I tell yuh?" squealed the sheriff. "Yuh can't fool me on the sound of dynamite. I worked too long in mines not to know. Of all the cussed plumb pizenous things to do!"

"Thank God that was a train carrying tools and equipment being brought in for repairs," quavered the superintendent, mopping the sweat from his ashen face. "If it had been one of those trains loaded with men!" He groaned.

THERE was a swirl and eddy in the crowd. Hatfield saw the massive John Bruton, the lord of San Pedro, plowing through. Beside him were Blaine Carnes, the freighter, and Rance Wagner.

Bruton paused, once he had got through the throng, which opened for him when it was seen who it was, and stared at the wreckage. He had opened his lips to speak when a lithe, graceful man strode forward and halted directly in front of the cattle baron. It was Larry Hodge, owner of the Bar H.

But there was no laughter in Hodge's blue eyes now. They were like splinters of sapphire in his bronzed face.

"A good chore, Bruton!" his voice rang out, dripping scorn and contempt. "Yuh ought to be proud of this one. The best ever! Blew two poor devils to bits. Yeah, yuh shore ought to be proud of this one!"

John Bruton stared at him, his jaw dropping. For a moment he seemed at a loss for words. Then his face flushed fiery red, his eyes glared, his mouth snapped shut like a bear-trap on its kill.

"Why, cuss yuh!" he roared. "Cuss yuh, yuh'll pay for that!"

His huge fist shot forward. If it had landed, it would have smashed the younger man's face to pulp.

But it didn't land. Even as it whizzed through the air, slender, bronzed fingers like rods of nickel steel caught Bruton's wrist, checked and diverted the blow with seemingly ridiculous ease, and swung the cattle baron around to face a man even taller and broader of shoulder than himself.

Jim Hatfield's voice sounded quietly as he dropped the man's wrist.

"He's nigh onto a hundred pounds under yore weight, feller. Cool down. Yore twine's draggin'."

There was a cool amusement in the quiet voice that boomed Bruton's anger to frantic rage. He gave a lionlike roar and went for his gun. His hand gripped the butt of the old single action Russian model Smith & Wesson that sagged low on his right thigh. But before he could unleather it, those steely fingers again closed on his wrist.

This time Hatfield was not fooling. Bruton's roar turned to a bellow of agony as the terrible grip ground the wrist bones together. His hand opened spasmodically and released the gun butt. Like lightning, he swung his left hand in a crushing blow.

But once more his fist missed its mark. He was whirled around, his arm was cramped behind his back and the intolerable leverage on elbow and shoulder joints brought him rising to his tiptoes, his face convulsed with pain.

Had John Bruton at that moment not been so fully occupied with his own troubles and had had the time to spare a glance at Rance Wagner, he would have surprised what was undoubtedly an unsuccessfully suppressed grin on his foreman's face. Bruton had heard of Wagner's discomfiture the night before at the hands of the man who now held him raging and helpless, and had commented upon it sarcastically.

Wagner made no move to help his boss, but Blaine Carnes, the tall freighter, took a half-step forward, his hand dropping toward his holster.

Jim Hatfield did not fail to notice the freighter's move. He spoke one quiet word:

"Don't!"

And Carnes, with the full force of the

Lone Wolf's icy eyes on his face, stayed where he was.

CHAPTER V

Complications

HATFIELD released Bruton's arm. He spoke, his voice quiet, and respectful with the respect due an older man.

"I'm not on the prod against you, suh," he said. "I'm just trying to keep yuh from doin' somethin' yuh'd be almighty sorry for right afterwards. Get yore feet on the ground, suh, and act up to yore station in the community."

Bruton turned around. He glared at the man who had worsted him with such ridiculous ease as to make him look like a fumbling sheepherder filled up on red-eye.

"But I ain't goin' to be accused of somethin' I didn't have nothin' to do with!" he roared.

His glare shifted to young Larry Hodge, who stood slightly dazed at the kaleidescope of action of which he had been the passive center. Hodge glared back, then abruptly he did something that caused him to soar in Hatfield's estimation.

"I apologize, Bruton," he said. "I had no proof to base what I said on." His glance shifted to Hatfield. "Much obliged, feller," he said, turned on his heel and vanished into the crowd.

It was John Bruton's turn to look dazed. He swelled, glowered, fumbled with his great hands.

"I reckon it's up to me to say the same thing to you," he growled at Hatfield. "Come on, Rance, let's be gettin' out of here."

He shouldered his way through the crowd. Rance Wagner flashed a grin at Hatfield and obediently followed his boss.

Blaine Carnes, the freighter, did not grin. He gave Hatfield a glance that seemed filled with speculation, and his pale eyes glittered as he turned away.

Hatfield watched him vanish in the wake of Bruton and Wagner. As he turned back to the scene of the wreck, he had a feeling that eyes were upon him. So strong was the feeling that he glanced quickly around.

Standing only a few paces distant was Kearney Lee, the owner of the Posthole Saloon. Lee was regarding him with an expression of sardonic amusement on his classically handsome face. The saloonkeeper nodded pleasantly enough as he met Hatfield's gaze, but it seemed to the Ranger that there was a gleam of mockery tinged with satisfaction in his strangely brilliant black eyes.

After the crowd had dispersed, and what could be picked up of the dead fireman and engineer had been carried away, Jim Hatfield still lingered at the scene of the explosion. He examined the fragments of the wrecked engine, estimated the depth and size of the crater the dynamite had hollowed out. He was particularly interested in the twisted rails and the splintered cross-ties scattered about. Finally he found a ponderous oaken tie, or rather, half of one, some distance from the right-of-way.

"This is the one the sticks were under, all right," he decided. "Half of it plumb blown away and powder burns on the end here. But how in blazes was it done? Looks like they must have used some kind of timing apparatus, but how did they set it to explode the charge right at the time that train was pullin' over this particular spot? A dozen trains passed this way since mornin'. And it's shore they didn't plant the stuff after daylight. The material train wasn't runnin' on a schedule, and even if it had been, the timin' would have had to be split-second. It's a puzzler, all right."

Again he went over the whole locality with the utmost care, until he had satisfied himself that there were no hidden wires that led to an electric detonator concealed somewhere. No, the charge had not been fired from a distance.

A timing apparatus of some kind appeared to be the only explanation. But that the timing had been, by pure coincidence, set for the exact moment the material train would pass over the spot seemed ridiculous. There was the remote possibility, of course, that the charge was fired by the shock of the passing train, but if this was so, why hadn't it been exploded by one of the dozen or more trains that thundered over the rails before the material train arrived?

Hatfield was unable to answer this question to his own satisfaction.

THE tragedy put a decided damper on the pay-day celebration. Men stood about in tense groups, talking in low tones,

their exhilaration and excitement of the morning dead as ditch-water.

A gang was hastily gotten together to repair the disrupted tracks. The workers moved cautiously, handling their picks and shovels and bars in a gingerly fashion, as if fearing unexploded dynamite sticks might be concealed in the debris, which, of course, was highly improbable.

Word came from the hospital that the wounded construction superintendent was still alive, but unconscious. The doctors gave him an even chance to pull through.

Old John Bruton sat in the Posthole, drinking moodily, his silent hands grouped about him and playing a desultory game of poker. Blaine Carnes, the freighter, played with them but seemed to take little interest in the cards.

Kearney Lee, immaculate, saturnine, alone seemed unaffected by the recent sinister happenings. Nor did he seem depressed by the decided falling off of the usual booming pay-day business, regarding the quiet groups with sardonic eyes, an occasional amused smile quirking his firm lips.

John Bruton kept glancing at his watch, as if expecting some event of importance to take place on schedule.

Hatfield saw Larry Hodge in the Four Sixes. Hodge also appeared depressed and ill at ease. He drank sparingly, and conversed in low tones with his riders.

"Everybody keyed up like cows in a thunderstorm," the Ranger mused. "Let one little thing off-color happen, and there'll be an explosion that'll make that one on the railroad look like a fizzled firecracker."

A distant whistle note sounded. It was the afternoon passenger train from Creston, the junction, forty miles to the east, a local service recently installed. A number of the Four Sixes patrons left the saloon to watch the train arrive, among them Larry Hodge and his men.

Hatfield also sauntered out. He reached the station just as the train was pulling in. Idly he watched the few passengers descend from the coaches. A trainman came down the steps, bearing a heavy suitcase. He reached up a hand to assist someone to the platform, and a girl stepped lithely from the coach.

She was small and slender, with curling, dark hair, wide blue eyes and red lips. Her piquant face was creamily sun golden and there were a few freckles daintily powdering the bridge of her little tip-tilted nose. She glanced about as if expecting someone.

Standing in the front rank of the watching crowd was young Larry Hodge. Hatfield saw his eyes widen as he gazed at the girl. She, at the same moment, picked up her suitcase and started toward the street. She stepped on a pebble and stumbled.

Larry Hodge leaped forward and caught her as she was about to fall. She clung to his arm, laughed merrily with a sound that was like little tinkling silver bells, and flashed him a grateful smile. Hodge released her, and his face flushed scarlet. He opened his lips to speak.

But at that moment a man shouldered in front of him, ignoring him as if he didn't exist. It was John Bruton.

The girl gave a glad little cry and flung herself into the old cattle baron's arms.

"Daddy!" she exclaimed delightedly. "Oh, but it's good to see you!"

John Bruton held her close for a moment, then he picked up the suitcase and turned. The girl, still holding fast to his great arm, flashed another dazzling smile over her shoulder to Larry Hodge.

"Thank you," she said.

LARRY HODGE stood like a man dazed, staring after her departing form.

"Helen takes more after her mom than her pap in size and good looks," Hatfield heard a bystander remark. "Reckon she's back home to stay now—been away to school."

Jim Hatfield chuckled softly.

"Complications!" he murmured. "Complications for shore and certain! But"—there was a mirthless gleam in his green eyes—"mebbe it'll be the straightenin' out of the mess in this valley. A feller can't very well go on fightin' with his wife's relations, and grandpappies have a way of changin' their notions, or having 'em changed for 'em."

As the western hills changed from hard gray to misty cobalt, with a silvery trembling evening star hanging over them, and the staring eyes of the windows became squares and rectangles of gold, the town regained something of the hilarity of the morning. Business began picking up at the saloons. The tight groups dissolved.

Men stopped looking over their shoulders in an apprehensive way. Music and laughter began to be heard. After all, it was pay-day. And death, sudden and sharp, was too

familiar a thing to the construction workers and the cowhands to create a lasting impression, even though it came in such startling, nerve-shattering a fashion as that which had overtaken the fireman and engineer of the material train.

Long before the blue dusk began sifting down from the hills, the damaged track had been repaired, the debris of the shattered roundhouse cleared away, and the turntable was back into place. The broken wall of the roundhouse would be rebuilt tomorrow and its sagging roof shored up.

CHAPTER VI

Fast Work

VANCE WAGNER and the Boxed B hands were still in the Posthole when Hatfield entered the saloon. John Bruton, however, was not present. Doubtless, Hatfield surmised, he had returned to the ranchhouse with his daughter. Blaine Carnes, the freighter, was also absent. Nor were any of his wagoneers, who had been in the Posthole earlier in the day, in sight.

A little later, Sheriff Dawson bustled in, tugging at his mustache and glancing about with a questioning eye.

"Everythin' quiet here?" Hatfield heard him ask a bartender. "I got a guard posted at the bank," he added, "but I've a notion Kearney Lee's got more *dinero* in his safe right now than there is in the bank vault."

"And I've a notion it's safer," the barkeep returned. "Lee sticks at the end of the bar, right beside the door to the back room, and it'd take a salty gent to get past him."

Hatfield glanced at the alert saloonkeeper with the glittering eyes, and was inclined to agree.

Sheriff Dawson drained the last drops of his drink and left the Posthole. Hatfield remained for a little while, thoughtfully eyeing the turbulent crowd. Then he, too, passed through the swinging doors to the street.

He sauntered along, turned a corner and approached the Four Sixes. He was but a little distance away when there sounded a roar of guns, a wild yelling and a crash of breaking furniture. Sheriff Dawson's voice rose above the din, squawking profane commands.

Again the guns boomed, and the golden windows of the Four Sixes abruptly went blank. The turmoil inside the saloon increased. Two men darted through the swinging doors, ran swiftly down the street, and vanished. An instant later, more men poured from the Four Sixes. There was a crash of breaking glass, again the boom of a shot, and yelling.

Hatfield had started forward, hands dropping to his guns, when the muffled roar of an explosion sounded somewhere farther down the street. Hatfield headed for the direction of the new outbreak, and was engulfed in the crowd boiling from the Four Sixes.

It took him minutes to fight his way through the seething throng of frantic men. As he finally got clear, he heard Sheriff Dawson's shrill voice behind him. He paused a moment until the panting peace officer caught up.

"What was that?" demanded Dawson. "Wasn't it dynamite?"

"Sounded like it," Hatfield agreed. "Down the street."

"The bank!" yelled Dawson. "Come on, feller! Where's Ladder Lane?"

"Comin'!" a voice sounded behind them, and the lanky deputy was at their side.

With Sheriff Dawson leading, they raced down the street.

"That's the bank—that two-story brick right ahead," panted the sheriff. "Listen, ain't that hosses?"

Hatfield's keen ears had already caught the sound of pounding hoofs drawing swiftly away into the darkness.

A moment more and he and the lawmen were before the bank building. Sheriff Dawson shrilled profanity as he saw the front door standing wide open. He plowed through, the others close at his heels.

The entrance was dimly lighted by a single lamp burning beyond the brass grill that spanned the room. The door that gave entrance through the partition was also open. Sheriff Dawson plunged through, halted, and swore like a maniac.

On the far side of the inner room was the vault. Its ponderous steel door lay on the floor, the dark interior gaped like an eyeless socket.

Hatfield jerked the lamp from its bracket and held it high.

The inside of the vault was a scene of confusion. Drawers lay on the floor, their

contents scattered. There was a gleam of gold pieces strewn about.

"They cleaned her," Ladder Lane remarked quietly. "*Was* that fast work! That fight in the Four Sixes was a phony, to attract attention. The hellions were workin' here all the time."

HATFIELD gripped the sputtering sheriff by the shoulder.

"That guard yuh said yuh had posted here—where is he?" he asked.

Dawson stopped swearing and stared at the Ranger in a dazed fashion.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "He'd ought to be here."

"Well, he ain't," Hatfield said. "Come on, let's look for him. I've a notion he needs help."

They ran from the building. The street outside was boiling with an excited crowd.

"Keep 'em out of here!" Hatfield tersely told Ladder Lane, who nodded, and took up his post at the door.

With a glance around, Hatfield led the way to the alley which flanked one side of the bank building. He peered into its dark mouth, then entered cautiously, glancing to right and left.

"Here's an open window, with the bars wrenched loose," he suddenly exclaimed.

An instant later he stumbled over something lying beneath the window, and realized it was the body of a man.

"Reckon this is him," he told Dawson, as he lifted the limp form in his arms. "Come along, we'll take him to the light."

The gleam of the lanterns hung on poles in lieu of better street lighting showed a pallid face streaked with blood that flowed from an ugly gash just at the hairline over the left eye.

"It's him!" squealed the sheriff. "It's Pike Ellison, my deputy. Is he done for?"

"Still breathin'," Hatfield replied. "Looks like he was belted over the head with a gun barrel. I've a notion he ain't hurt bad."

They laid the unconscious deputy on the board sidewalk.

While Dawson kept the crowd back, Hatfield made a swift examination of Ellison's injuries.

"Just got his senses knocked out—no skull fracture, so far as I can see," was his verdict. "Have some of them fellers carry him to the doctor's office or the hospital. He'll come around before long."

Several men picked up the unconscious deputy and started off with him.

"Here comes Mr. Wilkes, the bank cashier!" somebody shouted.

A nervous-looking, middle-aged man pressed his way to the front.

"Hello, Bob," greeted the sheriff. "Mebbe yuh can tell us how much they got."

The cashier entered the vault and made a swift examination.

"I can't say for sure, until I've made a thorough check-up," he announced, "but there was thirty thousand dollars in gold coin here, sacked, and that's missing. Who could have done it?"

"One guess," drawled Ladder Lane.

"Black Bart Clanton," said the sheriff, with a bitter oath. "Who the devil else?"

"Thirty thousand dollars in gold coin, sacked," Hatfield repeated the cashier's words. "Thirty thousand dollars in gold weighs heavy, Sheriff. Quite a load for hosses to pack. Mebbe yuh can run 'em down. Any notion where they'd head for?"

"For the Ladrones, by way of the Perdida Trail," Dawson replied instantly. "No place else for 'em to go. They wouldn't go down the valley—no cover. Yeah, they'd head for the Ladrones." He turned to the crowd. "I want a dozen men for a posse!" he called.

From the swarm of volunteers, the sheriff quickly selected his men. He swore them in as special deputies, including Hatfield in their number.

"Get right on yore hosses," he ordered. "We'll give them hellions a good run, anyhow."

Fifteen minutes later the posse thundered westward out of town, Hatfield, Sheriff Dawson and Ladder Lane at their head. They rode swiftly along the broad trail that flowed across the valley toward the grim "Robber Hills", twenty miles distant.

Their horses' hoofs were drumming the dawn up the eastern sky when they reached the first slope of the hills. Up this the trail wound. Some miles to the south was the dark mouth of the railroad cut, into which the shimmering steel rails vanished. Before the slope was reached there was a stretch of soft ground, and here they found indubitable evidence of horses passing not long before.

"And there's been no freight wagons, or anything else, usin' this trail since yesterday mornin'," said the sheriff. "It's them, all right."

THE trail climbed the slope for several miles and entered a gloomy gorge. This came to an end and the way led along the lip of a precipice for several more miles.

A couple of miles farther on the trail dipped over a rise and descended steeply into a wide hollow. Midway across the hollow a wooden bridge spanned a gorge some twenty feet in depth by sixty in width. At the bottom of the gorge flowed a swift, shallow stream.

Onto this bridge thundered the posse, the hoofs of the horses drumming hollowly on the boards. They were perhaps two-thirds of the way across when Hatfield, riding in front, felt the bridge sway beneath him. Instantly his voice rang out:

"Trail, Goldy! Trail!"

The great sorrel shot forward like an arrow from the bow. With a last convulsive leap he made it to the far bank, just as the bridge went down with a splintering crash, hurling men and horses into the icy waters of the stream. Pandemonium now ensued as the cursing riders strove to untangle themselves and get their frightened horses back onto their feet.

The water was not deep, but the sides of the gorge were absolutely sheer. It was only after more than two miles of floundering downstream through the cold water that the bruised and battered possemen found a spot where the horses could climb the bank. Hatfield had ridden along the top of the bank, shouting encouragement to his demoralized companions.

"The cursed loboes sawed the timbers of the infernal bridge almost through, after they crossed!" swore the shivering sheriff, ringing the water from his clothes and his drooping mustache. "Of all the pizenous sidewinders! If we don't all catch our death it'll be a wonder. That's some hoss of yores, Hatfield. First time I ever knowed a cayuse to sprout wings when he needed 'em!"

"Yeah, old Goldy is quite a hoss," Hatfield agreed. "He moves fast when fast movin' is in order."

"Uh-huh, and the jigger that rides him thinks fast when fast thinkin' is in order," remarked Ladder Lane in his soft drawl.

"Well, the hellions have got a start on us, now," said the sheriff. "But we ain't quittin' yet awhile. Let's get goin'."

They retraced their way up the stream and began the ascent of the far sag, which consisted of soft clay. They were not halfway up the slope, however, when Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt.

"A cold trail, Sheriff," he said quietly. "The hellions outsmarted us. They didn't come this way."

"Didn't come this way!" exploded Dawson, staring at the multitude of hoof marks that scarred the soft clay.

"Nope," Hatfield replied. "If yuh look close yuh'll see all them prints are at least a day old—that is, except one set of new ones, made by one hoss."

Sheriff Dawson swung down from his hull and examined the prints more closely. Then he swore until his face was red.

"Yuh're right, blast it!" he concluded. "Just one hoss, headed west, has passed this way since yesterday."

"The jigger they sent on ahead to knock the props from under them sawed bridge timbers," Hatfield observed. "The rest of the outfit turned off somewheres."

"But where?" demanded Dawson. "There's no place they could turn off this side of the rangeland."

"S'pose we go see?" suggested Hatfield. "No sense in followin' that lone jigger."

CHAPTER VII

Bank Business

GRUMBLING and swearing, the posse rode back downstream to where they could cross the gorge. After regaining the trail, they rode swiftly eastward. At the base of the first slope of hills, Hatfield pulled in. He descended from his horse and carefully scouted the ground at the base of the slope.

"All but that one jigger turned north," he announced, as he straightened up.

Sheriff Dawson and the possemen stared northward. For miles and miles, to the distant horizon, the empty prairie stretched before them. The unbroken slope of the hills flanked it on the west. Sheriff Dawson threw up his hands in despair.

"No followin' anybody over the rangeland," he said in disgust. "But where in tarnation did they get to? If they kept on north, or turned east, somebody would be shore to spot 'em, and there's no way into

the hills except by the Perdida."

"Hombres of their sort know things other folks don't," Hatfield remarked.

"I guess yuh're right," grumbled the sheriff, "but it shore beats me!"

A disconsolate posse rode slowly eastward in gloomy silence. A mile or so farther on was a low hill to the left of the trail. On top of this hill was a strongly built square house that looked like one block of rugged stone.

"That's where Blaine Carnes, the freighter, lives," said Sheriff Dawson, observing the direction of Hatfield's glance. "He bought it when he started business here. The Mexicans call it La Casa Espantosa."

"The Haunted House," Hatfield translated. "They got any reason for callin' it that?"

"Reckon they have," replied the sheriff. "Old Ezra Bass built it, nigh onto forty years ago, and hanged himself from a staple he drove in the beam over the front door. I've heard the staple's still there, but they took away the rope when they cut him down."

As they drew nearer, Hatfield gazed at the sinister-looking building with interest. Its massive oaken door was shut, its unlighted windows stared blankly. Its ponderous walls, rising sheer, without the relief of balcony or veranda, gleamed coldly in the morning sun.

Around the house grew scattered oaks, evidently of great age, wind-blasted, tortured things, all leaning to the north, as if straining away from the grim building. Although it was but early fall, their gnarled and twisted branches were almost leafless, and had the appearance of deformed arms seeking to ward off the buffetings of the gale that almost ceaselessly blew up from the hot wastes of the Perdida Desert.

"Don't figger I'd care to pick that for a place to live in," the Ranger observed.

"Nobody else did, either, until Carnes come along," grunted Dawson. "Blaine is a funny jigger. He brags he ain't scared of no ha'nts. Don't reckon he's scared of anythin' else, for that matter. He strikes me as bein' plenty salty. Nice quiet feller, though. I like him better'n Kearney Lee. I always get the notion Kearney is laughin' at everybody. Always a sort of grin back in them black eyes of his. I've a notion he even laughs at hisself."

"He's one of the really smart gents, then," Hatfield observed.

Dawson tugged his mustache. "Mebbe," he admitted dubiously, "but I never see anythin' about him that would make me laugh. I'd about as soon think of laughin' at a mountain lion. Kearney Lee ain't the kind to laugh at."

Hatfield was of the opinion that Dawson was not far wrong in his surmise. There was certainly little about the almost sinisterly handsome saloonkeeper that was mirth-provoking.

"Started out as a gambler, the chances are," he mused, thinking of Kearney Lee. "The sort of iron-nerved dealer yuh see behind tables where big games are goin'."

As the posse crossed the San Pedro Valley, they met trains rolling westward, loaded with workmen.

"The boys are headin' back to the job after their bust," remarked Dawson. He shook his head in answer to the questions bawled at them from the trains.

They found Cordy decidedly cooled down upon their arrival in the railroad town. The bank robbery was the chief topic of conversation, having displaced even the mysterious dynamite explosion that wrecked the material train the morning before.

SHERIFF DAWSON hurried to the hospital to interview his injured deputy, Pike Ellison. Hatfield and Ladder Lane accompanied him. They found Ellison sitting up and conscious, his head swathed in bandages.

"I heard a noise in the alley," he replied, in answer to Dawson's question. "I slipped in to see what it was. That's the last thing I recollect, except seein' a lot of stars and comets that busted inside my head."

While at the hospital, they inquired about Hartsook, the construction superintendent, who was drygulched from the alley beside the Posthole Saloon the night before payday. They learned that Hartsook was still unconscious and in a bad way.

"He's got a fifty-fifty chance to pull through," a doctor told them.

From Pike Ellison they got another interesting bit of information. Sheriff Dawson had wondered how Bob Wilkes, the cashier, had been so promptly notified of the robbery.

"Bob lives on his little spread, to the northeast of town," Dawson explained to Hatfield. "But he shore got to the bank in a hurry."

"Reckon I can tell yuh about that," vol-

unteered Ellison. "Right after yuh posted me at the bank, Neale, mebbe an hour or so before I got hit on the head, Wilkes and Kearney Lee showed up at the bank together. They was both carryin' valises. Wilkes said Lee was makin' a deposit of money he didn't like to keep in his safe overnight. They went in together, and a little while later they come out. I heard Wilkes say somethin' about droppin' in at the Ace-full right down the street from the bank, for a drink before he headed for home. Seems he'd stayed in town so Lee could make the deposit."

Sheriff Dawson tugged his mustache, and looked thoughtful.

"Let's stop at the bank a minute," he suggested as they left the hospital.

They found Wilkes, the cashier, busy in his cage.

"They got more than forty thousand dollars," Wilkes answered the sheriff's question. "Thirty thousand dollars in gold coin that was to be shipped by stage to the bank at Alpen, close to ten thousand that Kearney Lee deposited an hour or so before, and a couple of thousand in small bills. A good haul, all right. Of course the bank will have to make good the losses. Puts a heavy drain on our resources."

The sheriff swore gloomily. Jim Hatfield asked an apparently irrelevant question.

"Are the promoters of the new railroad line interested in the bank, Mr. Wilkes?"

The cashier gave him a sharp look. He hesitated a moment before replying.

"They are, most of them, owners of bank stock, if that is what you infer," he replied then.

"And they will have to stand the loss?"

"That's right," Wilkes admitted.

Hatfield asked another question, and again the bank cashier hesitated before replying.

"No, John Bruton does not own stock in the bank," he said with apparent reluctance. "He is a depositor, of course, but his only investment, so far as I know, is his ranch."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, then asked still another question. Wilkes showed signs of irritation at the catechism.

"I don't see why I should answer these questions, sir," he complained.

The Lone Wolf let the full force of his level gaze rest on the banker's face.

"Perhaps not," he replied, "but does Kearney Lee own stock in the bank?"

"Yes, he does," Wilkes admitted. "He's one of the largest stockholders. Been investing the proceeds of his business in the institution ever since he set up here. Bought several large blocks that were for sale."

Hatfield nodded again, the concentration furrow deep between his black brows.

"Be seein' yuh later, Sheriff," he said. "Thank yuh, Mr. Wilkes."

WILKES stared after him as he left the bank.

"That fellow has something about him that makes you do what he wants," the cashier complained irritably to Sheriff Dawson. "Why did he ask those questions, and what right did he have to ask them?"

"I don't know," Dawson replied. "He's a funny jigger, for a wanderin' cowhand, but he's almighty smart. If it hadn't been for him, we'd still be chasin' around through them blasted Robber Hills on a cold trail. Them funny colored eyes don't miss a thing. Yuh'd ought to been there when he mantamed John Bruton yesterday. And I'll be dadblamed if he didn't have old John askin' his pardon for what *he* did before it was finished! Did yuh ever hear of John Bruton doin' a thing like that? And when Blaine Carnes, who's as salty a hombre as ever spit on the ground, started to make a move to help John, Hatfield said just one word to him and Carnes froze like a rabbit with a hawk sailin' over his bunch of grass."

Wilkes looked deeply thoughtful.

"It seems to me that I have seen him before," he observed. "Seen him, or heard somebody talked about who answers his description."

"Reckon if yuh'd ever seen him before yuh wouldn't have forgot him," grunted the sheriff. "Specially if yuh happened to see him in action."

Wilkes nodded agreement, but continued to look thoughtful.

After leaving the bank, Hatfield walked to the Posthole and ordered a meal. While he was waiting for the food to be brought, Kearney Lee dropped into the vacant chair across the table.

"No luck in the robber chase, I understand," remarked Lee.

"Reckon that's right," Hatfield admitted.

Lee looked as if secretly amused about something.

"Neale Dawson is a sort of nice fellow," he observed, "but he sure was behind the door when they were handing out brains.

He's no match for Black Bart Clanton."

"He may turn out to be more than a match for him before everything is finished," Hatfield replied gravely. "Clanton is smart, all right, but Dawson has somethin' that Clanton hasn't got, somethin' that packs a lot of weight in a finish fight."

"What's that?" Lee asked curiously.

Hatfield let his level gaze rest on the saloonkeeper's face.

"A clear conscience," he said quietly.

Kearney Lee stared at him, an inscrutable look in his black eyes. Then he slowly nodded his head.

"You may have something there," he agreed, and without another word left the table and resumed his customary position at the end of the bar.

CHAPTER VIII

Owlhoots' Trick

BEFORE daybreak the following morning, Hatfield rode out of Cordy, headed west. He rode across the San Pedro with the brightening eastern sky behind him and the gaunt Ladrones drawing steadily nearer.

The wide valley was a shimmer of emerald in the strengthening light, and several streams that flowed from south to north edged the green garment of the rangeland with silver. Far to the south he could just see the ghostly gray gleam of the Perdida, the Lost Desert, with its endlessly shifting sands, its buttes and chimney rocks which the fingers of the wind had weirdly and grotesquely molded and polished.

Traversing the valley with its ribbons of steel, the railroad flowed toward the dark mouth of the cut the builders were driving through the granite battlements of the Ladrones. Where the cut was being driven, there was a deep notch in the hills that afforded a pass. The floor of the pass, however, was at too great a level above the valley to make a grade up the slope practical. When the cut was completed, the roadbed through the hills would be one with the elevation of the valley floor and would be perfectly straight.

It was a prodigious project, Hatfield knew, twenty miles from the San Pedro to the rangeland west of the hills. The tunnel through the crest of the ridge would be nearly two miles in length.

But Hatfield, with an engineer's understanding, could see that the great saving in grade and distance justified the expenditure, that is if the project could be consummated. Otherwise, the stockholders stood to lose the whole of their investment.

Hatfield passed the rise upon the crest of which stood the grim-looking house that was the abode of Blaine Carnes, the freighter. It seemed to him it looked even more austere than when he had ridden past it before, on the way back to town. A strong wind was blowing up from the desert and the twisted oaks surrounding it seemed to writhe in torment and strain to the north as if striving to tear their roots from the stubborn soil and flee the sinister building wherein a wretched man had choked out his life six and thirty years before.

Hatfield pondered the singular disposition of Blaine Carnes that could reconcile the freighter to make his home amid such gloomy associations and surroundings.

"Mebbe it is all the jigger could find, though," he admitted. "Houses ain't too plentiful hereabouts, and buildin' materials are mighty costly. Reckon Carnes figgered it would be better to live comfortable with a ghost or two than to have a shack or a lean-to all to himself."

He chuckled at the absurd conceit that had prompted the reflection, and rode on, leaving the gaunt building gleaming coldly in the morning light.

Where the slope of the hills began, Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt, hooked a leg comfortably over the saddle-horn and rolled a cigarette. As he smoked, he gazed earnestly toward where the twin steel ribbons of the railroad vanished into the cut as if the hills had swallowed them.

But when he finally pinched out the butt and gathered up the reins, he did not turn Goldy's head toward the distant right-of-way. Instead, he rode slowly north, keeping a few hundred yards to the east of the first sag swelling up from the valley floor.

As he rode, he studied the sinister loom of the hills, and also the ground over which he passed. The grassland showed no imprint of hoof, however.

"A company of cavalry could have gone by here and not left a mark," he told himself.

Try as he would, he could not pick up the

trail of the bank robbers who, he was confident, had ridden this way the day before.

Mile after mile he rode, with barren results. He explored several narrow canyons that slashed the hills, but each turned out to be a shallow box that provided sanctuary only for fat beefs bearing the Boxed B brand. Evidently this section of the valley was part of John Bruton's range.

AS HE progressed, the contours of the land changed somewhat. Rises and low hills became more frequent, as did clumps of thickets and occasional groves. Finally, some miles ahead, he discerned a fairly wide stream curving from a canyon mouth to trace a northerly course. This was the prevailing flow of all the streams, he had observed.

"The slope of the country hereabouts is reversed from what yuh usually run into down here," he mused. "Reckon that's what makes the Perdida Desert. The desert is a low plateau, that was once a high mesa, hundreds of thousands, or millions of years ago, and worn down by erosion. Time will come, but it'll be a mighty long while, when that section will be lower than this valley, and then there won't be any desert. The drainage will reverse and the flow will be to the south instead of to the north and east and then south. Now it's similar to the way the Rio Grande heads north to form the Big Bend."

Between him and the stream, and a mile or so to the east, were a number of groves, with undergrowth choking the space between the trees. He had just passed the first of these when some instinct caused him to glance over his shoulder. As he did, his black brows drew together.

Horsemen were streaming from the grove, a half-dozen of them, and headed in his direction at a swift pace. He studied their advance, then spoke to Goldy. The sorrel quickened his pace until it was equal to that of the distant horsemen.

Hatfield continued to study the group, and quickly discerned that they were pushing their horses to greater efforts. They had already considerably shortened the distance between them and himself.

His interest quickened, he again spoke to the great sorrel.

Goldy began to extend himself, and draw away from the hard-riding group.

"Thought so!" Hatfield suddenly muttered.

From the close ranks of the following horsemen mushroomed a puff of whitish smoke. Before he heard the smack of the report, a crackling sound split the air nearby. It was the sound of a passing bullet fired from a high-power rifle, a sound once heard, never forgotten.

Hatfield had heard that sound before. His face set in grim lines. He loosened his heavy Winchester in the saddle-boot snugged under his left thigh.

"So some of the boys want to play tag, eh, feller?" he remarked to Goldy.

He was more interested and amused than concerned over the development, for he was confident that Goldy's great speed and endurance left him little to fear from the pursuing horsemen, who undoubtedly meant business.

Slugs continued to whine past as Goldy increased the interval, but Hatfield knew that shooting from the back of a horse at that distance was nothing but guesswork, and that barring a phenomenally lucky shot, he had nothing to worry about. He continued to hold his own, meanwhile studying intently the mannerisms and mode of riding of the men who pursued him, storing the information gained for reference in the future.

Abruptly, however, he abandoned this interesting and perhaps profitable pastime. His attention was distracted by a bullet whining past from another direction. He turned in the saddle and saw a second group of horsemen bearing down on him from a grove to the northeast.

With nerve-twanging suddenness the situation had become deadly serious. Escape to the north as well as to the south was blocked. Should he endeavor to veer to the east, he would be heading to the point of a triangle with the pursuing horsemen converging by way of the short sides. They would rapidly gain on him and before he could hope to win clear, despite the greater speed of his mount, they would be within easy shooting range. To the west was the rugged slope of the ridge.

His only chance, and that a slim one, he quickly decided, was the mouth of the canyon from which the stream flowed, only a few hundred yards ahead and less than half a mile to his left.

"Trail, Goldy—trail!" he shouted, and at the same time swung the sorrel's head sharply to the west.

WITH everything that was in him the great horse responded. Slugging his head above the bit, his eyes rolling, his nostrils flaring, he fairly poured his long body over the ground. The shouts of the pursuers came faintly to Hatfield's ears above the drumming of Goldy's irons.

He could hear the crack of the rifles the pursuers were firing wildly. Bullets whistled past, some of them uncomfortably close, or they kicked up spurts of dust from the ground. Now that he was fleeing at an angle to both groups, they rapidly closed the gap. As he dived into the canyon, he felt the wind of passing slugs.

Once inside the narrow gorge, Hatfield breathed easier. The canyon was choked with brush, much of it dead and leafless, but of a height to afford a comforting concealment. He shrewdly suspected the canyon was a box, like those he had explored earlier in the day, but even if this were so, the advantage of cover was all his.

The drygulchers would hesitate to pay the price they knew would be exacted if they attempted to search him out for a finish fight amid the chaparral. Darkness was but a few hours off, and could he stay in the clear until nightfall, escape would be an easy matter.

For some distance he sent Goldy headlong through the brush, regardless of thorns. Once he was well under cover, he slackened the sorrel's pace.

"Take it easy, feller," he cautioned. "Then we can hear 'em comin' if they get too close. We had a close shave, but things are comin' our way now."

He listened intently as he rode, but as he got farther into the canyon, the only sounds that broke the silence were those aroused by his own passing, and the ripple and murmur of the stream flowing down the canyon.

Gradually, however, another sound intruded itself. At first it was a whispering which grew to a mutter, then to a subdued rumbling.

"I thought so," he interpreted the monotonous cadence. "She's a box, all right. That noise is a fall where the crick comes over the end wall. Looks like we'll have to stick around and play hide and seek with them lead-slinging gents till dark, if they're of a mind to try and smoke us out."

And then abruptly he was to realize that "smoke him out" was what the aforesaid gents aimed to do—literally. That which suddenly stung his nostrils and caused him to sniff sharply was no figure of speech.

"The fangin' sidewinders!" he exclaimed angrily. "They've set fire to the dry brush in the canyon, and the wind is blowin' this way. Hoss, yuh got a good chance to find out how a ham in a smokehouse or a steak in a skillet feels!"

CHAPTER IX

Flame and Smoke

SEEMING to sense the danger, Goldy plunged forward as fast as the dense growth would allow. But stronger and stronger grew the acrid tang of burning wood and stewing sap. Blue wreaths and swirls began fouling the clean air and dimming the bright sunlight.

Borne on the wings of the wind which poured up the gorge, came an ominous muttering that was disquietingly different from the loudening rumble of the fall, and which grew and deepened even more swiftly than the low roar of the tumbling water. Hatfield coughed as the fumes irritated his throat.

Goldy snorted, and tossed his head. From time to time he shivered convulsively, not the pleasurable trembling induced by the exhilarating excitement of the chase outside the canyon, but a clammy shuddering of sheer terror.

The brush became even denser. In desperation, Hatfield veered the sorrel to the stream that flowed down the center of the gorge and sent him plunging into the water. It was shallow, fortunately, and the floundering horse made somewhat better speed even over the boulder-strewn bed of the creek.

The smoke was so thick now that breathing was increasingly difficult. Hot ash and burning brands, whirled aloft by the strengthening wind, were showering down, and momentarily threatening to start fresh fires ahead of them. The air quivered to the crackling and roaring of the flames, which were sweeping up the canyon in a solid wall of fire, and with the speed of a galloping horse.

Jim Hatfield's face was set in bleak lines, his eyes were coldly gray. He had one chance, and only one, so far as he could see, and that was a slim one which entailed

abandoning his horse to a fiery death. He could crouch beneath the water, open the lock of his rifle, place the muzzle in his mouth and, with the open lock stuck above the surface, possibly obtain enough air to survive, if the smoke did not get too dense.

But this was a last resort, to be attempted only if all else failed. He determined to save his horse, even at the extreme risk of his own life, but just how it was to be done, he at the moment had no notion. Meanwhile, he sent the frantic animal plowing up the stream at the fastest pace possible.

Gradually the roar of the waterfall drowned even the bellowing of the fire. It was close now, though as yet hidden by the intervening brush and the winding of the stream. Glancing over his shoulder, Hatfield could see a vast column of smoke boiling into the air. Beneath the smoke cloud was a red inferno of seething flame. The air was stifling hot, almost unbreathable, reeking with smoke and acrid fumes. Ahead he could see growing flickers where falling brands had ignited the dry growth.

And then, directly ahead, only a few hundred yards distant, he saw the fall. As he had surmised, the canyon was a box, walled by a cliff some hundreds of feet in height, over which the creek plunged to fall amid a cloud of spray into the catch basin at the foot of the cliff.

And as he stared with smoke-reddened eyes at the thundering torrent, Hatfield experienced a wild thrill of renewed hope. If the fall was similar to others he had known of, there was a chance of escape for both him and his horse.

He veered the sorrel to the left bank of the stream and sent him scrambling up it to a little rocky strip which stretched, free from growth, along the water's edge. Straight for the frowning cliff face he urged the frantic animal. Under the shelter of its overhang, he swung from the hull and gripped Goldy's bit. Then he stepped boldly toward the boiling edge of the falling water, hugging the cliff face as he did so.

Instantly the mist of spray enveloped him in a choking cloud. Goldy snorted, and held back. Terrified as he was by the flames racing toward them, he feared even more this myterious, clammy thing that strangled the breath in his laboring throat.

Hatfield spoke soothingly to the frightened animal. His senses were reeling, there were hot flashes before his eyes, a band of steel seemed to be tightening about his chest. The fierce heat of the fire, only scant yards distant now, sapped his strength and numbed his mind. Ducking his head to the beat of the falling water, he plunged straight into the fall, shouldering against the cliff, dragging Goldy after him by one final prodigious effort.

HE was almost knocked off his feet by the force of the pounding water, but before he lost balance, his surmise proved correct and his knowledge of the peculiarities of waterfalls, especially those of great height was the salvation of both him and his horse. Close to the cliff face, the falling water was only a thin sheet of the overflow, mostly mist and spray, and between the body of the fall and the cliff face was a shallow space.

There was barely room for them to hug the damp face of the cliff. In front of them the misty curtain of the fall streamed down, darkly green, shot with curdled sparkles. Gradually the green curtain glowed with vivid colors. Fretted fires and marvelous opalescent tints seemed to play over its surface. This phenomenon, Hatfield knew, was due to the flames reaching up the canyon to the very verge of the downward rushing water, and their light being filtered through the changing curtain of the plunging stream.

The scene was a fairyland of bewildering beauty, and the Lone Wolf was so entranced by it that he forgot the discomfort of the mist-charged air and the chilling cold of the damp hollow in which he crouched. The air, strained through the water, was free from smoke, and breathable.

But poor Goldy, who had no share in these pleasurable emotions, shivered and snorted, and breathed in choking gasps.

Gradually the glowing curtains dimmed and darkened, until the rushing water had resumed its normal tint of translucent green. The fire was burning itself out.

Hatfield waited a while longer, then dragged Goldy through the film of water to the outer air.

The canyon was still choked with smoke, but this was thinning under the beat of the wind. Here and there patches of growth continued to stew and smolder, but the main body of the fire had died for want of fuel.

Finally Hatfield mounted, and sent Goldy into the stream. He rode slowly downstream, through the hot and smoky air, until he

reached the mouth of the canyon. There was no sign of the drygulchers. Doubtless they had ridden off, confident that their victim was nothing but charred bones somewhere in the depths of the gorge.

After scanning the terrain in the last light of the setting sun, Hatfield rode out of the canyon. He hesitated a moment, then turned the sorrel's head to the south. He could not hope to pick up the trail of the killers in the darkness that was fast deepening. Under the brightening stars, he rode swiftly toward the Perdida Trail that led back to Cordy.

Full night had long descended when at last he reached the trail. He was cold, famished, and deathly tired, and the prospect of the twenty-mile ride across the valley was not alluring.

Goldy was tired, also, and instead of his usually sprightly gait it was with a weary shamble that he slogged along the windings of the trail.

Suddenly Hatfield saw a light ahead. At first he thought it a peculiarly low and lurid star, but as he drew nearer, it resolved into a glowing window pane atop a low hill. He recalled the sinister-looking building, La Casa Espantosa, that was the domicile of Blaine Carnes, the freighter.

"Looks like somebody is at home in the darn shack," he muttered, staring up the slope at the glowing square that seemed to hang detached in the air. "I wonder, now? Uh-huh, I'll try a throw at it. Sleepin' in a haunted house is better than a twenty-mile ride, any night. And there had ought to be chuck up there. Hit the hillside, hoss, and mebbe yuh'll be puttin' on the nosebag soon."

As he drew nearer the house, the grim building took form, shouldering darkly against the star-strewn sky. The black branches of the trees, waved like threatening arms that warned him away. The wind made a heart-chilling music amid the few withered leaves that still clung to the stems.

GRADUALLY the Ranger was aware of other music, a hauntingly beautiful but weird melody that throbbed above the rush and murmur of the wind. It was the sound of a golden-toned piano played by a master hand.

"If that's Blaine Carnes playin', there's a side to him most folks don't know about," the Lone Wolf muttered.

He swung down before the heavy door that was reached by way of two broad stone steps. As he mounted them, he thought he heard another sound threading through the overtones of the magnificent piano—a low, threatening growling. And abruptly the music stopped.

Hatfield hesitated, then knocked boldly on the door. Utter silence followed. Even the ominous growling ceased. Then there was a sound of shuffling steps, the rattle of a chain, and the clang of a displaced bar. The door swung open on screaming hinges and revealed an old, old man with a face like yellow ivory carved in myriad wrinkles.

It was a sinister countenance, the lips a bloodless gash between the sagging cheeks, the nose the hooked beak of a bird of prey, its sharp tip almost resting on the pointed chin. Set under bushy white tufts, and deep in cavernous sockets, were eyes as hard and bright as a snake's, and with something of the opalescent fire under a glassy film that characterizes a reptile's eyes.

Hatfield stared at this singular apparition, bereft for the moment of words. The old man likewise stood silent, glittering at him. Finally he said in a creaking voice, with an animal-like champing of his toothless jaw:

"What yuh want?"

"A stall for my hoss, something to eat, and a bed," Hatfield replied, relying on the customary hospitality of the rangeland for unhesitating acquiescence.

The oldster continued to stare with his winkless eyes. He made no move to step aside and permit Hatfield to enter.

"We don't hanker for company here," he creaked.

"Mebbe not," the Ranger replied, "but I reckon yuh won't turn a cold and hungry man away."

Without further words he brushed past the old man and stepped into a big, darkly paneled room. The oldster creaked a protest behind him, but closed the door with a bang, its unoiled hinges screaming shrill agreement with his inhospitable sentiments.

Hatfield glanced about, and saw that the room was comfortably, even richly furnished. What caught his eye instantly was a great dark piano that stood between two wide windows. At the piano was seated a sullen-faced girl who regarded him with as scant friendliness as had the old man.

Hatfield removed his hat, and bowed to the girl. She made no effort to return the salutation but continued to stare at him

with great, hostile eyes that were so darkly blue as to seem purple. Her lips were vividly red, her masses of hair, wound about her shapely head in two thick braids, was jet-black and reflected the light in a cold way that reminded Hatfield of the chill gray walls of the house in the morning sunlight.

She had beauty, but it was a sinuous, repellent beauty. Her hands, long, supple, dead-white, with delicate, almond-shaped nails, rested on the yellow keys of the piano, and she regarded the undoubtedly unwelcome visitor half over her shoulder.

"I told him we didn't want nobody here," creaked the sinister old man.

The girl spoke, her voice rich, throaty, with a rebellious note in it.

"He's here now," she said. "I reckon he'll have to stay. Put something on to cook in the kitchen, Abijam."

The unusual name by which she addressed the old man caught Hatfield's interest. Somehow it had a familiar ring. He wondered where he had heard it before. Then abruptly he recalled a rangeland preacher reading from the Bible, in the Book of Kings, about one Abijam:

> And he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord.

Hatfield chuckled softly under his breath.

"And I'd say from the looks of this one that the name still fits plumb well, even after a few thousand years," he soliloquized.

As the unsavory-appearing namesake of the Biblical character nodded to the girl, Jim Hatfield's eyes were thoughtful.

CHAPTER X

A Girl and a Dog

OBEDIENT to the girl's orders, the old man shuffled to a door in the far wall and disappeared. Soon a banging of pots and pans sounded somewhere in the depths of the house.

Hatfield sat down in a chair, beside the wide hearth, on which a good fire of logs was burning. The girl continued to regard him silently. Hatfield returned her stare, resolved not to break silence first.

Gradually, however, he developed a feeling that other eyes were regarding him, eyes equally hostile and suspicious. Glancing about, he fixed on them. Green and baleful and fiery, they glared from under a big chair on the other side of the hearth. Looking closer, he saw that they belonged to a huge, shaggy dog who crouched there.

Hatfield leaned forward, snapped his fingers.

"Hi, feller," he said.

A low growl was his reward, and a baring of milk-white fangs. Hatfield chuckled, and leaned nearer, stretching out his hand, palm uppermost. Again the dog growled, curling his lip over his gleaming teeth.

The girl broke her silence, with apparent reluctance.

"Don't touch him," she warned. "Nobody can touch him. He'll tear your hand to pieces."

"Reckon not," Hatfield replied imperturbably.

He squatted beside the chair and stretched his hand still farther toward the crouching dog, talking soothingly the while in his deep, low voice, his gaze steady on the dog's smoldering eyes.

A third time the animal growled, but this time there was a querulous uncertain note in its deep rumble. Some of the fire seemed to die in its glowing orbs, its lips raised slightly, then lowered. The growl became almost a whine. Its tense muscles seemed to relax.

Fearlessly, Hatfield reached forward until his hand was under the beast's massive lower jaw. He scratched the hairy surface with gentle fingers, passed his hand upward and scratched behind the shaggy ears. The dog remained perfectly motionless. Then without warning, it butted its great head into Hatfield's palm, snuffled with a damp, icy nose, and licked his fingers.

With a chuckle, Jim Hatfield resumed his chair. Again he snapped his fingers.

"Come on here, now, feller," he said.

Slowly the dog crawled from beneath the chair. It walked across the hearth in a dignified fashion, sat down, and laid its head on the Ranger's knee, looking up at him with steady eyes.

"Well, if I hadn't seen it, I never would have believed it!" said the girl. Under the influence of her astonishment, she seemed to have thawed appreciably.

"He is about half-wolf," Hatfield said,

deprecating his feat. "That breed is sort of leary about takin' up with strangers."

Bestowing a pat on the dog's head, he stood up, smiling down at the girl from his great height.

"Reckon there's a place where I can put up my hoss?" he suggested.

"There is a stable back of the house," she told him. "You'll find a lantern hanging on a peg in the kitchen. Through that door."

With a nod of thanks, Hatfield strode to the door in the far wall. The great dog got to his feet and sedately followed.

Passing through the door and down a passage, the Lone Wolf eventually found himself in the kitchen. The ancient iniquity who answered to the name, Abijam, was pottering about the stove. He shot a glance at the Ranger, but said nothing.

Hatfield took the lantern from a peg near the rear door and lighted it. He opened the door, which led to the outer air, and saw the dark loom of the stable about a hundred yards distant and set a little below the hilltop, so that it was invisible from the trail running past the house.

Soon he had Goldy comfortably stalled and munching a manger of oats, of which there were several sacks in the stable. Goldy had the place to himself for the present, but there was evidence that the stable had housed a number of cayuses from time to time.

JUST outside the kitchen door was a bench upon which rested a basin, soap, and a bucket of water. A rough but clean towel hung nearby. Before reentering the house, Hatfield enjoyed a good wash-up. He combed his thick black hair, knocked some of the dust and ash from his clothes, and felt decidedly better.

The meal was not quite ready, so he returned to the big living room and sat down once more. The wolf-dog, who had gravely superintended all operations outside the house, stretched out at his feet.

The girl had left the piano and was seated in the chair across the hearth. She did not speak or look up when the Ranger entered, and her face had resumed its sullen look. She sat staring moodily into the fire, her purplish eyes somber, cold glints striking from her dead-black hair.

Hatfield felt an urge to try and draw her out.

"I heard and enjoyed yore playin' as I rode up," he remarked. "Yuh have a fine touch, and that's a splendid piano."

For the first time, her face showed a trace of animation.

"It's a wonderful instrument," she agreed. "The finest I ever saw. We found it here when we moved in."

Hatfield nodded.

"Blaine Carnes lives here, doesn't he?" he asked.

The girl shot him a glance that seemed charged with resentment.

"I guess you know he does, or you wouldn't be here," she said, her voice sullen and bitter.

"I was told he lived here, when I rode past yesterday," Hatfield replied gently.

The look he got in answer to the statement was undoubtedly tinged with suspicion, if not downright disbelief. The girl shrugged her slim shoulders and resumed her staring into the fire.

Before Hatfield could think of anything more to say, Abijam stuck his head into the room and creaked:

"Yuh better come out before everything gets cold."

By the time Hatfield had finished eating, he decided that whatever Abijam was or might be, he certainly knew how to cook. He told the old fellow so when he pushed back his plate, and was rewarded by a snort. His firm lips quirking slightly with amusement, the Ranger managed to construct a cigarette with still damp papers and tobacco and smoked while Abijam cleaned up the dishes. Then he returned to the living room.

The girl was not there, so he asked Abijam where he was to spend the night.

"The first door to the right at the top of the staircase," Abijam grunted, and banged a pot with vicious violence.

Chuckling, Hatfield mounted the stairs and located the room in question. The bed was comfortable and he stretched out with enjoyment. First, however, he cleaned and oiled his guns.

"Shore some folks hangin' out in this casa," he told the big Colts. "If I hadn't been told different by the little lady, I'd figger Carnes took 'em over along with the ghosts when he moved in. I noticed that staple was still in the beam over the door. It looked sort of hungry, as if waitin' for another gent to come along and do a dance on nothin' under it. . . . "

Some time during the night, Hatfield was

awakened by the sound of horses, followed by a murmur of voices in the lower part of the house. He lay listening for a while, then heard someone ascending the stairs, not furtively, but with the purposeful tread of a person who knows exactly where he is headed for.

The steps passed his room and continued down the passage. A door creaked open, then closed. Silence followed. As it remained unbroken, Hatfield turned over and went back to sleep.

He did not waken again until after daylight. He could detect sounds of activity below, so he arose, dressed and descended to the first floor. On entering the living room, he saw Blaine Carnes sitting by the fireplace smoking.

THE freighter glanced up as Hatfield entered. He was in the act of raising his pipe-stem to his lips, but the pipe halted in mid-air and remained motionless in Carnes' hand for a moment. Hatfield saw his powerful fingers tighten about the bowl.

"Why, hello," greeted Carnes in surprised tones. "My sister told me somebody was stoppin' over for the night, but I didn't figger it was somebody I'd know. Cal'lated it would be just a chuck-ridin' cowhand."

"Well" — Hatfield smiled — "mebbe yuh wasn't far wrong at that. I'm not tied up with any spread right now."

"Uh-huh, and that brings up somethin' I wanted to talk to yuh about," rejoined Carnes. "I'm glad yuh dropped in like yuh did. I'd figgered to look yuh up in town today, if yuh were still hangin' around. Got a proposition to make yuh."

"How's that?" Hatfield inquired, with mild curiosity.

"It's like this," explained Carnes. "I reckon yuh know I run a line of freight wagons from Cordy to Alpen, the other side of the Ladrone Hills. Well, day before yesterday I made a dicker and took over the stage-coach line, too. The coaches make the run to Alpen every day, comin' back to Cordy the day after. Valuable shipments go both ways by stage, and with things like they are hereabouts, it's necessary to have a guard on the stage. I've got a couple of good men, but I could use another. I've a notion you'd be a good man for the job. What yuh say? It'll pay yuh better'n ridin' for a spread would, and it's a sight easier work."

"Sort of hirin' a man for a responsible job without knowin' anything about him, ain't you?" Hatfield remarked.

Carnes shrugged his powerful shoulders.

"I usually do purty well at pickin' men to work for me," he replied. "Don't often make mistakes. Besides, Sheriff Dawson thinks mighty well of yuh, and even old John Bruton put in a good word for yuh, even though yuh did make him look foolish the other day. Bruton is cantankerous as a bear with a sore paw, but he don't hold back from speakin' well of a man if he figgers he's got it comin' to him—even though he don't care much for the gent. I figger yuh could get a job of ridin' with old John, if yuh went to him and asked for it. But I think I'm makin' yuh a better offer."

Hatfield considered. The proposition had its attractive features. It would provide him an excuse for hanging around, and would give greater freedom of action than a job of riding for a spread.

"All right," he accepted. "I figger yuh've hired yoreself a hand."

"Fine!" exclaimed Carnes. "Yuh can go out on the run tomorrow. The coach leaves Cordy at eight o'clock in the mornin'."

Old Abijam creaked from the kitchen.

"If you fellers wanta wash up before eatin', yuh'd better hurry," he warned. "The biscuits will be done in a minute."

"All right, 'Bije," Carnes replied.

He arose and went to the foot of the stairs.

"Breakfast ready, Rita!" he called.

CHAPTER XI

Hades on Wheels

CARNES and Hatfield reentered the kitchen, after washing up at the bench outside. The girl was already at the table. Her cold beauty showed to even greater advantage in the morning light, but it seemed to Hatfield that the sullen and rebellious expression of her face was intensified. She had no greeting for either of them and bent her eyes to her plate throughout the meal.

As Hatfield rolled a cigarette, Carnes left the table to perform some chore upstairs. Old Abijam shuffled outside. Hatfield was left alone with the girl.

"Didn't know Carnes had a sister," he remarked, by way of making conversation.

"He hasn't," the girl replied. "I'm only his stepsister. My name isn't Carnes, it's Rosa—Rita Rosa."

"That's a mighty purty name," Hatfield observed.

The girl shrugged.

"It serves its purpose," she replied morosely.

Carnes came back into the kitchen at that moment.

"Ready to ride to town?" he asked Hatfield.

The Ranger nodded and rose to his feet.

"Good-by, Miss Rita," he said.

The girl shot him a swift glance half-veiled by the thick fringe of her long, dark lashes. Her eyes flickered sideward to Carnes, who was regarding her with a slight smile widening his hard mouth.

"Good-by," she said, rose to her feet and left the room.

Hatfield also said good-by to Lobo, the great wolf-dog. Lobo did not seem at all pleased over the parting. But he as pointedly ignored Carnes as did the girl.

Carnes saddled a big bay and led him from the stable. Hatfield got the rig on Goldy, and together they rode westward along the Perdida Trail through the gold of the morning sunlight.

A work train roared past with a clanging of side-rods. Carnes nodded toward it.

"John Bruton, and some other gents think they can stop the railroad from goin' through," he observed. "They're wrong. They can't stop it. The road will go through, in spite of all they can do to hamper it."

"It will sort of knock the props from under yore freightin' business, won't it?" Hatfield remarked.

Carnes shrugged.

"I reckon so, after a while, but I'll get into somethin' else," he replied. "It won't be the first time I've been knocked out. I'm makin' money right now, and there's always somethin' for a feller with get-up-and-get. May go into the likker business. Kearney Lee is makin' money hand over fist at it."

"Understand yuh was born and brought up in the Panhandle country," Hatfield said.

"That's right," Carnes answered.

"Are the blizzards up there as bad as I hear tell?" the Ranger asked.

"Reckon they're as bad as anythin' yuh heard, or worse," Carnes replied grimly. "They shore knocked me out of the cow business in a couple bad years."

They found the town quiet enough upon their arrival. But it was not quiet an hour or so later, when an engine and a single flat car roared in, bringing half a dozen badly injured men to the hospital.

"There was another dynamite explosion, out to the end of the line," a trainman explained the injuries. "Blew an engine and a crane off the track. Killed two men and hurt a lot of others. How in blazes the hellions managed to plant dynamite there is a puzzler. There's a night shift workin' there at the railhead—men around at all hours. But they did it. She cut loose just as the engine was pullin' the crane into position.

"Just about got things at a standstill," he added. "It was all the foremen could do to get the hands back on the job, and they're just pickin' at things. Scared to hit a real lick. About one more like this and there'll be a general strike. Everybody's got the jumps. Beats all how they do it! Nothin' to show how it was done. Just a big hole in the ground, and the engine and crane busted all to smithereens."

CARNES had gone to his office to attend to some chores there. Hatfield dropped into the Posthole and paused beside Kearney Lee at the end of the bar. Lee nodded cordially and make a remark about the latest outrage.

"Yes, the railroad is havin' tough goin' in this section," Hatfield observed. "If this keeps up it'll hit the town hard, too."

Kearney Lee smiled his thin, mocking smile.

"Makes little difference to my business," he said. "Men will drink, and gamble, and make hogs of themselves generally, no matter what comes or goes."

He glanced contemptuously at a couple of cowhands wrangling over their glasses.

"Yuh don't seem to have much faith in yore fellowmen," Hatfield commented.

"Not much," Lee agreed. "Guess I've seen too much of them. I'm beginning to lean to the notion that the only really honest men are ones like Black Bart Clanton, who set themselves against the existing order and exploit it for their own benefit. Clanton is honest in his selfishness, anyhow."

Hatfield stared at the amazing cynic. Lee stared back, a mocking light in the depths of his black eyes. Gradually, however, he seemed to find something disquieting in the Ranger's steady gaze. He glanced away,

shrugged his shoulders, and ordered a drink on the house. After emptying his glass, he nodded shortly, turned and entered the back room, closing the door behind him.

"Kearney don't feel so peart today," a bartender confided to Hatfield. "He was out ridin' yesterday. Didn't get in till way after midnight, and he showed up in a mighty bad temper about somethin'. Got one of his hands burned somehow—a big blister on it."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Mebbe he was saddle sore, too," he commented. "A long ride is sort of hard on a jigger who is not used to forkin' a hull regular."

"Shucks, no," grunted the barkeep. "Kearney does a heap of ridin'. He's always jauntin' off somewhere. Sometimes he's gone for a day or two, but yuh never can tell when he's goin' to show up. Keeps the boys on their toes."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, and did not comment further.

Sheriff Dawson congratulated Hatfield on signing up with Carnes.

"Blaine Carnes is a good man to work for," the sheriff said. "Pays good wages and backs up his hands in everything. They stick close to him, all right, and that must mean they think right well of him. I hear he held onto the drivers that worked for the stage-coach company before he took over. That's a good notion, too. Them fellers know the trail and they're used to handlin' the stage. Takes considerable savvy to manage a six-hoss team right on a trail like the Perdida. One slip up there where she curves around the cliffs and the whole shebang would drop a couple hundred feet into the canyon. It's a bad bit of travelin' up there."

Hatfield, recalling the section of the trail where the overhanging cliffs towered on one side and but a few yards distant the crumbling lip which flung off into nothing at all, was inclined to agree. . . .

The following morning, Hatfield took his place on the driver's seat of the coach, his loaded Winchester resting across his knees. Beside him sat the driver, a lanky old-timer with little to say.

The stage paused before the bank. A heavy iron box, double-locked, was carried out and placed in the body of the coach. The stage carried no passengers to Alpen this trip and therefore the doors were locked. Neither Hatfield nor the driver carried a key. They would be opened with a duplicate on arrival at the Alpen bank.

Sheriff Dawson superintended the loading of the coach.

"There's night onto twenty thousand dollars in that box," he told Hatfield, in low tones. "The Cordy bank is responsible till it's delivered in Alpen."

"Carnes doesn't insure the shipments, then?" Hatfield asked.

"Nope," Dawson replied. "He's got to provide guards and all necessary precautions to insure delivery, but that's as far as his responsibility goes. He refuses to haul valuable shipments if he's to be held responsible for possible loss. He's follerin' the policy of the stage-coach company he took over."

"The time will come when all such shipments will be insured," Hatfield predicted. "The bank should take out insurance on such shipments as this."

"Rates are mighty high," Dawson replied. "Cow country banks don't like to spend money they figger they don't have to."

"They're liable to find themselves spending a heap more if one of these shipments gets lifted on the way over," Hatfield said grimly.

"Uh-huh, but I've a notion they won't be spendin' any on this one," the sheriff replied, glancing at the Lone Wolf's stern face and the businesslike manner in which he handled the heavy rifle.

"Hope not," Hatfield said, "but sometimes owlhoots have a heap more savvy than folks give 'em credit for."

SHORTLY afterward the stage rolled out of Cordy and headed across the San Pedro. It made good time on the level prairie, but slowed down decidedly on the long slope that led to the gorge. The six mettlesome horses had all they could do to drag the heavy vehicle up the steep sag.

Upon reaching the crest, the driver pulled them to a halt and let them blow. Then he gathered up his reins and sent them into the gloom of the gorge, through which the trail ran almost straight for two miles. Here they again made good time.

Hatfield sat alert and watchful, studying every clump of thicket and outcropping of rock as they whirled past. Here, he decided, was the ideal place for drygulchers to operate. There was plenty of cover, and no slope down which a frightened team might take the bit in their teeth and run away, some-

thing stage robbers always had to figure on.

The taciturn driver evidently held similar views. He was ill at ease all the time they were passing through the gorge, and he heaved a gusty sigh of relief as they plunged from the gloom and into the sunlight once more.

Not that his job was made any easier. For now came the stretch of trail that skirted the edge of a dizzy precipice for several miles. Sharp turns were frequent, and any mishap might well hurl the coach and everything connected with it into eternity. To complicate matters, the trail here had a steep downward slope.

But nevertheless the driver sent his horses along at a good clip, handling them in a masterly fashion that won Hatfield's approval. He himself had relaxed somewhat after leaving the sinister gorge. He still concentrated his attention sharply on the turns, but with a towering cliff on one side and a perpendicular drop to the canyon floor more than two hundred feet below on the other, he decided there was little to fear from owl-hoots on this particular stretch.

Both he and the driver were utterly unprepared for the tragedy that struck with appalling suddenness.

The coach was careening around a curve when without warning the outer front wheel spun from the axle, hurtled over the lip of the trail and vanished into the depths below. Down went the axle, deprived of its support. It struck the ground with prodigious force. The coach reeled wildly, the inner front wheel coming clear off the ground.

The driver was shot from the seat like a stone from a catapult. His yell of fright thinned to a shriek of abject terror as he cleared the lip of the precipice and shot downward. Hatfield barely saved himself by an iron grip on the railing that surrounded the seat. Instinctively he grabbed for the reins, that were trailing over the dashboard, and got them the instant before they flipped to the ground.

As the crippled coach bounced and thundered at their heels, the terrified horses bolted. Wild with fright, they fled madly down the steep and winding trail, skidding around the turns leaping, floundering, straining every nerve and muscle to escape the horror that crashed and bounded at their heels.

With each beat of the sagging axle on the ground, the coach lurched and reeled crazily, on the verge of an upset a hundred times a minute. It slammed against the cliff face with a force that threatened to smash it to splinters, slithered toward the yawning gulf, zigzagged back and forth. Once the outer rear wheel was actually over the lip, and spun crazily in empty air for a split second before slamming down on the trail once more.

With every ounce of his iron strength, Hatfield fought to get the frantic horses under control. As the coach crashed against the cliff face, he was all but knocked from the seat. The terrific jar of the dragging axle meeting solidly with a projecting boulder hurled him forward against the dashboard. Luckily the impact was too much for the boulder and rooted it from its bed instead of turning the coach over on top of the horses.

Around a hairpin turn wheeled the bounding vehicle, the horses leaning far over and keeping their footing by a miracle. The veins stood out on Hatfield's forehead like cords. One shirt sleeve split from shoulder to wrist under the mighty swell of his arm mucles. The stout dashboard creaked and groaned as he braced his feet against it and dragged back on the reins.

There was a terrible danger that the lines would snap under the fearful strain put upon them!

CHAPTER XII

Both Ends Against the Middle

POWERFUL as the Lone Wolf was, he could not match strength with the six maniac horses with the bits in their teeth. He realized that sooner or later he would, momentarily at least, lose control and the whole equipage would hurtle into the gulf that yawned for it hungrily. He gambled everything, his life included, on a desperate chance.

Directly ahead, a shoulder of rock jutted out sharply from the main mass of the cliff. As the raging team bore down upon it, Hatfield gauged the distance, and put every particle of his strength in one mighty pull that swerved the horses sharply to the right.

The team flashed past the shoulder, the inside leader rasping against the stone and all but losing his footing. But the remaining

front wheel did not miss. It slammed against the unyielding stone with a force that hurled Hatfield from the seat to land on the back of the off wheeler, from whence he rolled to the ground to lie with one foot dangling over the gulf.

The wheel flew to splinters, the ponderous iron axle snapped like a straw; but the progress of the coach was stopped as if by a mighty hand. With both front wheels gone, the body fell forward and jammed against the cliff shoulder. The stout leather traces held and the horses were swept off their feet in a squealing, kicking tangle, the breath knocked out of them, and with it their urge to keep on running.

His head spinning, sweat pouring down his face and soaking his body, every nerve and muscle shaking from intolerable strain, Hatfield staggered to his feet. He called soothingly to the struggling horses, jerked out his knife and commenced cutting them free from the tangle of harness. They regained their feet, snorting and trembling, and huddled against the cliff, too exhausted and nerve-shattered to seek to escape.

The Lone Wolf leaned on the sagging coach body and breathed in great gulps of air. Glancing up, he saw his Winchester hanging between the seat and the guard rail. Absently he reached up and got the rifle. Then, tucking the gun under his arm, he fumbled out the "makin's" and essayed rolling a cigarette.

For a minute or two his fingers trembled so he could hardly manipulate paper and tobacco, but as he got his breath back and his muscles relaxed, his nerves steadied again. A few deep lungfuls of smoke helped materially.

He smoked the cigarette until the fire stung his fingers. Then he carefully pinched out the butt and tossed it aside. Stepping to the lip of the precipice, he stared up the canyon where lay the lifeless, broken body of the driver.

He was about to step back to the coach when he detected movement in the straggle of brush several hundred yards up the canyon in the direction from which he had come. Then a body of horsemen rode out of the brush. Hatfield could see that their eyes were fixed on the rim of the cliff.

"Reckon them gents saw that tight-rope act we were doing up here," he muttered, his gaze on the approaching horsemen.

Suddenly he leaped back from the cliff edge, ducking down at the same instant. His keen eyes had detected a flicker of fire. A bullet screeched over his head and slammed against the cliff face. Others followed it. He hurled himself to the ground, the Winchester thrust out in front of him.

Prone on the ground he lay, his icily cold eyes glancing along the sights.

Smoke wisped from the rifle's muzzle. The boom of the report echoed the crackling of the guns on the canyon floor.

One of the approaching riders threw up his arms and spun from the saddle like a tumbler performing his act. Hatfield fired again, and a second man reeled, clutched at the saddle-horn for support and fell forward on his horse's neck. The rifle muzzle shifted slightly, spurted smoke a third time.

A yell of pain drifted up from the canyon floor. The horses of the approaching men were milling in wild confusion, their riders desperately fighting to turn them. Another moment and they were scudding back the way they had come.

THE Lone Wolf sent a stream of lead hissing after them. He did not cease pulling the trigger until the last of the band had vanished into the brush. Then, his eyes still fixed on the fringe of growth, he rapidly reloaded the rifle. For some moments he watched the distant bristle of leaves and and branches. Then he lowered the Winchester and stood up.

"Reckon they got plenty," he muttered. "So that was it! Wasn't an accident, after all. Reckon they figgered to pick the money-box out of the smashup down there in the gulley."

Turning, he eyed the wrecked coach thoughtfully. Leaning the rifle against the body, he stooped over the axle from which the wheel had spun free. As he traced the threads that should have held in place the nut which secured the wheel to the axle, the concentration furrow between his black brows deepened.

"The pizenous sidewinders!" he muttered, straightening up.

Then he did a strange thing. Selecting a conveniently sized boulder, he deliberately smashed and burred the threads out of shape, just as they could have been damaged by the axle bumping over the stones in the course of its wild career along the trail. Next he smashed the coach door with the boulder and dragged out the iron strong-box.

The exhausted coach horses were still huddled against the cliff. With straps cut from the harness, Hatfield lashed the box to the back of one of them. Then he took one of the reins, knotted it to the animal's bit ring and passed it through the bit rings of all but one of the others. Mounting the sixth horse, he headed down the trail toward Alpen, the rest of the team trotting docilely after him.

This was the strange procession that, a few hours later, startled the eyes of the astonished citizens of Alpen.

Hatfield rode straight to the Alpen bank. He cut the strong-box loose, lifted it to his shoulder and strode into the bank.

"I'd like a receipt for this," he told the astounded bank officials. "And send a telegram to Sheriff Dawson in Cordy," he added. "Tell him to ride to the canyon below the cliff trail and pick up the stage driver, or what's left of him. Tell him he'll find a punctured gent, mebbe two, a little farther down the gulch. Now where's the stage station? There's a chore for the fellers there to do, too."

After Hatfield recounted the mishap on the trail, a crew set out from the stage station to repair and bring in the damaged coach. Hatfield located a restaurant and enjoyed a hearty meal.

THE town hummed over the attempted robbery.

"Reckon Black Bart and his hellions got more'n a bargain this time," was the pleased consensus of opinion. "Figger they'll lay off the stage when that big feller's ridin' it. He's a cold proposition, all right. The hellions must have been trailin' the stage, hopin' for a chance to land on it. That wheel comin' off that way came mighty nigh to playin' into their hands. Somebody must have give that coach a mighty careless goin' over in Cordy, lettin' it go out on the run with a nut axle loose . . . Poor old Hank Brody—he was a good feller. Drove the stage for night onto six years without ever havin' any trouble. Reckon they'll bury him in Cordy. He hung out there most of the time."

The following morning, Hatfield rode back to Cordy on the patched-up coach. The return trip was made without incident. Upon arrival in the railroad town, he immediately hunted up Sheriff Dawson.

"Yeah, found the driver," Dawson said. "He wasn't purty to look at. But Jim, are yuh shore yuh knocked off one of them hellions?"

"Well, if I didn't, from the look of him there on the ground, some jigger with a spade is due to play an awful joke on him," Hatfield told the lawman grimly.

"Mebbe," the sheriff said dubiously. "But he shore wasn't there when we went to look for him. All we could find was some blood spots on the rocks."

HATFIELD nodded thoughtfully.

"It's a smart bunch," he said. "They don't miss a trick. Sneaked back and carried him off. Didn't care to take chances on somebody recognizin' him and tyin' him up with somebody or somethin'. This is interestin', anyhow."

"Why?" asked the sheriff.

"Because," Hatfield explained, "it shows that the outfit—some of 'em, anyhow—don't always keep under cover. Chances are some of them jiggers are right here in town often. Somethin' to keep in mind."

"Yuh're smart, too," admired the sheriff. "Feller, yuh'd ought to be a peace officer. Yuh'd make a prime one."

Hatfield smiled slightly and did not reply.

"How's things out on the railroad line?" he asked.

"Nothin' special happened in the last couple days," Dawson replied. "Only they ain't gettin' much work done. The hands are all scared to make a move without investigatin' the ground careful first. At this rate, they'll never get the job done in time. The road's under contract, yuh know, to finish the work by a certain date. They're subject to penalties if they don't, and they'll lose them mail and express contracts they're countin' heavy on.

"There's another line, the T and W, buildin' up to the north, and if they get through first, they'll get the contracts. At first it looked all easy ridin' for the C and P. Don't look so good, now. Time's gettin' almighty short, and so is money, I've heard. I was told the backers have just about scraped the bottom of the barrel. Too bad. Some of them fellers mortgaged their spreads to get the money to put into this thing. Looks like John Bruton was plumb smart, per usual. He said the road would never get through, and it shore looks like he was right."

"Bruton has been workin' to keep it from goin' through, eh?" Hatfield asked.

"Uh-huh," Dawson said, and made a long,

explanatory speech for Hatfield's benefit. "Bruton, he made 'em trouble over to the capital, and he used his influence with the banks here and at Alpen. The backers wouldn't have much luck borrowin' any more money to put into this thing. They tried to get a lot of Mexicans up from below the Line to work on the cuttin'. They are good rock men, yuh know, and they don't mind the heat, but Bruton pulled a wire with the immigration authorities, I understand, and the notion fell through.

"John's got influence, and he's a fighter, and stubborn as a blue-nose mule. I ain't sayin' he ain't right about this thing, accordin' to the way he looks at it, but I feel sorry for them fellers that stand to lose their money and mebbe their spreads. I'm sort of beholden to John—he got me elected to office, but just the same I tried to persuade him to take the screws off a mite. He cussed me out.

"Blaine Carnes told him he didn't figger the road could be stopped, except mebbe for a while, but Carnes strings along with him, just the same. It's sort of to Carnes' interest to keep the road from goin' through, but he shore ain't no fool. Of course, a year or two of delay in the line bein' built would work to his advantage—he'll have his freightin' business just that much longer—but I've a notion he's already figgerin' on gettin' inter some other line.

"Gettin' the contract to haul them ties for the road was a smart move on his part. He's done a good job of deliverin', and I reckon the road will throw business his way whenever it can. Nope, I don't reckon Carnes to lose much by the road bein' built, and yuh can bet yore bottom peso he knows it. But he's smart enough to keep on the good side of Bruton, too."

"Sorta playin' both ends against the middle," Hatfield commented.

"Uh-huh, and standin' to win a pot no matter which way the cat jumps. Blaine is a good business man. Got a head on him in more ways than one. He says that the road goin' through will mean the end of jiggers like Black Bart Clanton, and 'lows that will be good for any honest businessman. He's right, there."

"Yes," Hatfield agreed thoughtfully. "Jiggers like Clanton are no help to honest enterprise."

That night, Hatfield came upon John Bruton in the Posthole. The cattle baron was playing poker with several other spread owners. He called Hatfield to the table.

"Hear you did a mighty nice chore yesterday, son," he congratulated the Ranger. "Uh-huh, mighty fine. Yuh seem to be cuttin' a right wide swath since yuh landed here. I want yuh to meet some friends of mine. Like to take a hand in the game? Stakes ain't too high. I'd like to see if yuh're as good at poker as yuh are at twistin' arms."

The reference to his discomfiture at the hands of the Lone Wolf was made in gruff but not unfriendly tones.

Hatfield grinned, and sat in on the game.

CHAPTER XIII

Blasted Morale

IT WAS two hours later when Bruton threw down his cards in disgust.

"I know when it's time to quit," he growled. "Whenever I run up agin' a jigger with enough nerve and savvy to bluff me out of a big pot with nothin' but a bob-tailed flush, I'm pullin' in my horns."

He glowered at Hatfield. Then abruptly he smiled, and for a moment his hard, bad-tempered old face was actually boyish.

"Bust out a bottle of the prime stuff yuh keep hid under the bar, Kearney!" he bellowed to the saloonkeeper. "Reckon a mite of celebration is in order."

After Bruton and his friends left, Rance Wagner, who had been watching the game with great interest, joined Hatfield at the bar.

"There's one good thing about John," the Boxed B foreman chuckled. "He don't often have to pack a lickin', but when he does, he packs it like a man. He's shore takin' a shine to you, Hatfield. I reckon if yuh bust him in one more thing, he'll be yore friend for life."

Later, the foreman puzzled over the peculiar look in Jim Hatfield's eyes when he smiled reply.

"Now what has that big jigger got up his sleeve?" Wagner querulously asked himself. "From the look he give me, I'd say he's twirlin' a loop to bring John up short over somethin'. He's shore a funny feller. I can't make him out. Who in blazes is he, anyhow? Bob Wilkes, the bank cashier, swears he's

seen him somewheres, and not punchin' cows, neither. Anyhow, I'd just as soon tangle with a mountain lion. But I bet he'd be a prime jigger to ride the river with."

Anyone familiar with the hazard's connected with riding a herd of longhorns across a swollen stream would understand how outstanding was the compliment the Boxed B foreman paid Jim Hatfield, and how high he stood in Wagner's estimation.

The stage-coach was undergoing further repairs and Hatfield had the following day off. Early morning found him riding across the valley. Before he reached the first slope of the hills, he left the trail and diagonaled in a southerly direction until he was opposite the dark mouth of the railroad cut. Without hesitation he sent Goldy into the cut and rode between the towering walls of dark stone. He eyed the work with an engineer's appreciation of the magnitude of the job.

"She'll be worth while when she's finished, though," he told himself. "This means a big thing to this part of the country. It'll bring new folks in—the right kind of folks. They'll come lookin' for homes, and they'll come to stay. That's what Texas needs—more homes, and the right kind of folks to live in 'em. This chore finished, means a lot more than just profits for the stockholders. It means opportunity for folks, new and better things, progress. Yes, the road must go through. It means a whole lot, hoss, to have even a little part in makin' a chore like this a success."

His strangely colored eyes were sunny as he rode on, the sounds of the activities at the railhead growing louder and more distinct as he progressed. The chattering of steam drills threw back echoes from the stone walls, and the puffing of steam shovels and the thud of their great mouthfuls of earth and rock being dumped into the waiting cars to be borne away.

Soon he could distinguish the clink of hammerheads on drills, the rasp of shovels, the clanging of spike mauls. He rounded a shallow curve and a busy scene was unfolded before his eyes.

The cut was being made wide enough to accommodate two main tracks and a siding, for Jaggers Dunn built for the future. A switch engine was puffing busily, shunting cars onto the siding from the main tracks, sorting them out for convenient disposal.

Pulling Goldy to a halt and hooking one leg comfortably over the saddle-horn, Hatfield rolled a cigarette and sat watching the operations. Directly ahead was a beetling wall of rock, from the base of which the shovels tore huge masses of talus. Farther up the wall, the drill men bored holes to receive the dynamite charges that would bring down more of the cliff face.

GROUPS of men were laying ties and spiking rails into place. Gandy dancers, foot on shovel shoulder, were tamping earth and stone under the newly placed ties, performing the queer, eccentric shuffle with their feet that gave them their peculiar name. The heads of spike mauls flashed circles of light as they drove the heavy spikes into the ties, clamping down the tie plates and wedging the ponderous steel rails firmly into place.

Foremen were busy with track gauges, making sure that the rails were uniformly spaced. Wrenchmen bolted the fish plates into place, securing the rails end to end with just the proper space between to take care of the expansion and contraction of the steel in hot or cold weather. Sledge-hammers

[*Turn page*]

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swung onto drill heads where hand drilling was required. Men with picks and shovels were busy grading the right-of-way ahead of the rails.

The switch engine came puffing back almost to where Hatfield sat his horse, pulling a single car loaded with crossties. It screeched to a halt as the engineer applied the air. Hatfield saw him throw the reverse lever into forward position and reach for the throttle.

A switchman swung a target from white to red, opening the siding switch. He turned and energetically waved a "Come-ahead" signal. A second switchman, standing on the front step of the engine, grasped the lever that would raise the coupling pin.

The locomotive's stack boomed, the drive wheels bit the rails, turned over faster and faster. The switchman on the step sawed his hand up and down in the stop signal and jerked the lever, raising the pin and uncoupling the car from the engine.

The engineer slammed his throttle shut and applied the air. The engine came to a quick stop, but the loaded car, reeling and rocking, took the switch points and whizzed down the siding.

"Yuh kicked that one too darned hard!" the yard conductor bawled irritably to the engineer. "Want to knock the drawbar out of it?"

There was a string of cars already on the siding. The car of ties struck the rearmost with a crash of coupling drawbars.

The conductor opened his mouth to shout further profane protest—but what he said was never heard. It was drowned in a roaring explosion that seemed to cause even the adamant walls of the cut to rock and reel.

Through a mushrooming cloud of yellowish smoke, Hatfield could see splintered crossties, portions of the car and earth and stone flying in all directions. Goldy gave a prodigious snort, rose on his hind legs and did a dance of pure terror. It was all Hatfield could do to keep him from wheeling and bolting back down the cut.

As the smoke cloud rose, Hatfield saw that pieces of the car and its load of ties were scattered all over the cut. The rails were twisted and broken. A hole in the ground showed where the car had stood. The engineer, dazed and bleeding, was picking himself up from the floor of his cab. One switchman lay unconscious, the other was running about crazily, as if bereft of his sense.

"I told yuh yuh kicked it too hard!" the conductor was insanely bawling, over and over again. "I told yuh yuh kicked it too hard!"

As Hatfield's deafened ears resumed something approaching normal, he realized that the chattering of the drills had ceased. The steam shovels swung idle. The cut rang with shouts and curses. Men were boiling toward him, completely demoralized, madly fleeing the scene of the disaster. There would be no more work done this day.

Hatfield slipped from his horse and ran to the fallen switchman. An examination convinced him that the man was only stunned from the concussion, and had not been struck by flying debris. Turning him over to the engineer, who had a cut on his forehead but was in full possession of his faculties, Hatfield surveyed the scene.

The crater was not so deep, but was wider than that hollowed out by the blast at the outskirts of Cordy. The tie-loaded car had been blown to fragments, its load scattered far and wide. The nearest two cars of the string ahead of it lay on their sides, their loads spilled on the ground. In general, however, the damage done was comparatively slight.

THE damage done to the morale of the workers, however, was anything but slight. They stood in tense groups, shaking their heads, pointing and grimacing, making no move to resume their tools. The foremen did not attempt to get them back on the job. They themselves apparently had no stomach for returning to the railhead.

A worried-looking man who turned out to be the construction engineer in charge of the project was hurrying about asking questions.

"Another charge set under the rails," was the consensus of opinion. "But how in blazes did they do it?"

Hatfield listened thoughtfully to the excited conversation. He said nothing himself, but the concentration furrow was deep between his black brows as he eyed the scene of destruction.

Some of the workers cast suspicious glances in his direction, but no one approached him. Soon afterward, he mounted his horse and rode out of the cut, thinking deeply. . . .

The train that pulled out of Cordy the following afternoon, headed for the junction

to the east, was loaded to the doors with construction workers who had thrown up their jobs.

"I got enough," Hatfield heard one remark. "I ain't takin' no more chances. Twice I came nigh to gettin' it. The third time is liable to be the charm."

"No third time for me, either," another replied with emphasis. "The darn job is jonahed, that's what it is. Them outlaw fellers up in the hills don't want this road to go through there, and they're goin' to see to it that it don't."

This last was the growing opinion in Cordy.

"Looks like it's all over for the boys," Sheriff Dawson said to Hatfield. "There'll be more quittin' tomorrow. They'll spread the word, and it'll be mighty hard to get men to take their places. Yes, I'm scared this is the finish. Let's go over and see Kearney Lee and have a drink. I feel I'm needin' one."

The Posthole was crowded with railroad builders who had not as yet quit their jobs, but who were taking the day off to recover from the effects of their recent experience.

John Bruton was also present, at a table with Rance Wagner, Blaine Carnes, and some of his hands. Bruton did not look as pleased as might have been thought probable. Instead, his face wore a worried look and he seemed uncomfortable under the frequent glances cast in his direction by the groups conversing in low tones at the bar.

"Them fellers are sayin' John is in cahoots with Clanton and his owlhoots," Dawson observed to Hatfield.

"I've a notion mebbe he is," the Ranger replied grimly.

"Yuh don't mean that, Hatfield," Dawson said as he stared at him.

"Mebbe not just the way yuh figger it, but I mean it, all right," said Hatfield.

Dawson opened his mouth to protest, but after a look at Hatfield's bleak face, apparently changed his mind.

"There's Kearney Lee," he remarked. "Got the look of a cat that has just swiped a saucer of cream and sees the door of the canary's cage open. I can't make that jigger out."

The mocking gleam in Lee's black eyes did indeed appear more pronounced than usual, and his gaze was one of mocking amusement as it rested on the occupants of Bruton's table. A moment later he strolled along the bar and joined Hatfield and the sheriff.

"Look at Bruton squirm," he remarked, without explanatory preamble. "Being the big skookum he-wolf in this country doesn't seem to set so well all of a sudden. Carnes seems pretty well satisfied with himself, however."

"Blaine stands to win no matter which way the cat jumps," grunted Dawson. "And everybody knows he's said all along that Bruton was ridin' a blind trail, and he don't hold no stock with Bart Clanton and his owlhoots."

KEARNEY LEE'S smile was inscrutable. "The Clanton methods are more direct," he remarked.

Sheriff Dawson stared at him in an uncomprehending way, but Hatfield eyed the saloon keeper with interest.

"Been ridin' any more lately, Lee?" he asked.

Kearney Lee darted him a piercing glance.

"Yes," he replied. "I was riding day before yesterday—over to the west of the valley. Is your question answered satisfactorily?"

"Not quite," Hatfield replied quietly. His eyes were heavy on Lee's face.

But this time the saloonkeeper met his steady gaze unflinchingly.

"You don't strike me as the sort that often makes mistakes," he remarked.

"No," Hatfield replied, "I don't."

"I'm glad, very glad to hear it," Lee said. He turned and walked back to the end of the bar.

Sheriff Dawson blinked, bewildered by this subtle interchange.

"What's the matter with you fellers?" he demanded querulously. "Sounded like yuh was takin' sly digs at each other."

Hatfield chuckled, his green eyes sunny.

"Mebbe we were both diggin'—and uncovering paydirt," he replied.

CHAPTER XIV

Knife in the Dark

SHERIFF DAWSON gave a disgusted snort, and changed the subject. During the day, as the hours wore on, the sky became overcast. A chill wind blew from the

north. Great masses of cloud hurried across the sky. A wild-looking moon glared through rifts in the clouds and cast weird shadows across the prairie.

The windows of Cordy were mistily golden, and everybody without business on the streets remained indoors.

John Bruton, Blaine Carnes and the Boxed B hands played poker in the Posthole. Jim Hatfield did not sit in the game. He visited the Four Sixes and chatted with a sociable barkeep there.

"Larry Hodge, the Bar H owner, was in a little while ago," the bartender informed him. "Acted all excited about somethin'. Wonder if he's had another run-in with John Bruton. Reckon Larry ain't feelin' so peart, what with the trouble the railroad is havin'. Understand he's got most everything he owns tied up in the new line. I heard he's mortgaged his spread. But he didn't seem a bit down-in-the-mouth. Kept grinnin' to hisself over his drink. Looked at the clock all of a sudden and hustled out, leavin' his glass half-filled on the bar. That shore ain't like a cowman. Rope twirlers don't usually let anything stand between them and their likker."

Pondering the unusual behavior of the young Bar H owner, Hatfield left the Four Sixes and sauntered to the Posthole. Bruton and his companions were still wrangling over their cards, but Lee was not in sight.

"Kearney went upstairs to his room a little while ago," the head bartender informed Hatfield, in answer to the Lone Wolf's question. "Said he wouldn't be around for a spell. That may mean most anything from ten minutes to a week. Yuh never can tell what that jigger is goin' to do, or when he'll show up."

The rooms above the Posthole were reached by way of a hall door and a stair adjoining the saloon. Hatfield finished his drink and sauntered out. At the corner he crossed the street and strolled back down it until he was opposite the hall door. He stepped into the darkened shelter of a shop doorway and lounged against the wall.

He had been standing there for perhaps ten minutes when Kearney Lee came out of the building across the way and hurried up the street with purposeful steps. Hatfield drifted after him, keeping in the shadow of the buildings. Lee turned the corner and entered an alley. A livery stable was situated on that alley, Hatfield knew. He obtained a point of vantage where he could keep the alley mouth in sight, and waited.

Perhaps fifteen minutes elapsed, then Kearney Lee rode out of the alley and turned west on Pisano Street, the continuation of which was the Perdida Trail.

Hatfield waited until he was out of sight, then hurried to the stable where Goldy was stalled. He swiftly got the rig on the sorrel, and rode west himself.

A half-mile or so outside of town he picked up his man. The moon, shining through a sudden rift in the clouds, poured a flood of silvery light over the prairie. Hatfield saw Lee, far ahead, and riding swiftly.

Taking advantage of every bit of shadow that afforded cover, the Ranger followed. When the clouds banked up over the moon, he lost sight of the quarry, but occasional gleams always showed Lee riding westward across the valley.

But the clouds were steadily thickening. The gleams of moonlight became increasingly rarer. While Hatfield was still several miles from the first slope of the hills, rain began falling. The night grew as black as pitch.

Hatfield donned his slicker, bent his head to the wind, and rode on. He increased Goldy's pace somewhat to close the distance between him and his quarry. He ran the risk of being seen if the moon should suddenly break through the clouds, but decided to risk it. He was at the beginning of the slope when the moon did break through, and assured him that he was in no danger of Lee spotting him. For the simple reason that Lee was nowhere in sight.

For some minutes Hatfield sat his horse in utter perplexity. Before him stretched the long slope of the sag, with the trail running up it straight as an arrow. There were neither rocks nor brush outcropping to obscure his view. It was ridiculous to think that Lee had been able to cover the intervening miles to the crest of the slope before Hatfield's arrival at the base.

North and south stretched the prairie, equally void of cover for miles. To all intent, the saloonkeeper had vanished in thin air.

THE stretch of soft ground leading to the base of the slope was scarred by innumerable hoof prints and it was impossible to pick out any one set of tracks in the rain-splashed soil. There was no way of telling

which way Lee might have turned, had he come this far.

Hatfield glanced south toward the railroad cut. No, the man would not have had time to reach the concealment of the cut. With an exclamation of disgust, the Lone Wolf turned Goldy's head and started the long ride back to town. And at that moment the clouds rolled over the moon, the wind blew a fiercer blast and the rain came down in torrents.

Thoroughly out of temper, Hatfield quickened Goldy's pace.

"Trying to figger that jigger out is like tryin' to tell which way a pickle will squirt when yuh squeeze it," he growled. "June along, hoss. This rain must have come all the way from the North Pole to let loose here, from the way it feels."

Goldy sloshed along the muddy trail through the driving downpour, undoubtedly as disgusted as was his rider. His sleek coat streamed water and soon he was crusted with mud to his barrel. But despite the discomforts of the ride, Hatfield was whistling cheerfully, and Goldy's ears were pricked forward and his step was sprightly.

Suddenly Hatfield saw a glow of light through the drifting rain mists. He quickly realized that it came from a window of Blaine Carnes' house atop the hill to the left.

Opposite the winding path that led to the hilltop, he pulled Goldy in. He had an urge to visit La Casa Espantosa again, other than a natural desire to get in out of the wet. The house and its strange occupants interested him.

"Wonder what that gal would look like if she happened to be feelin' happy?" he asked himself. "And wonder if old Abijam is ever in a good temper? About the only one up there who reacts normal is Lobo, and even he was slow about makin' up his mind to be halfway decent."

With a chuckle, he turned Goldy's head up the hill.

As he drew near the house, he again heard music. But blended with the girl's masterly piano playing was a voice, a man's voice. It was a full, rich tenor singing a love song of old Spain, and the singing did credit to the piano accompaniment.

"Now what?" The Lone Wolf wondered. "This casa gets to be more and more of a puzzler all the time. Any time, now, I figger to see old Ezra Bass who, according to Sheriff Dawson, built the house, doing a dance on the front steps. That is, if ghosts know how to dance."

Under the blasted oaks he halted Goldy. The singing continued.

Hatfield meditated on the glowing window square. It opened, he knew, onto the living room where the piano was. Arriving at a decision, he slipped from the hull, left Goldy under the scant shelter of an almost leafless oak, and quietly approached the window. Keeping his face out of the direct beam of the light, he peered into the room.

He could clearly see the piano at which the girl was seated. And the first thing he noted was the astonishing change in her appearance. The sullen look was gone from her face, her red lips were sweetly curved and her eyes were great purple pools in which the lamplight struck golden glints. Instead of the coils of tightly braided hair, were clustering, glossy curls that wantoned about her face and rippled down her back to her waist.

Hatfield abruptly realized what a really beautiful woman she was.

The man who stood beside her at the piano was tall and gracefully formed, and of a singularly elegant appearance.

Even as Hatfield stared, the music ended in a crash of golden chords. The girl looked up and laughed, with a flash of teeth startlingly white against the vivid red of her lips. The man half-turned, and the lamplight fell full on his regularly featured face.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" the Ranger said softly, under his breath.

The man beside the piano, up into whose face the girl was gazing with her very soul mirrored in her eyes, was—Kearney Lee!

MOTIONLESS, the Lone Wolf stood and stared through the rain-streaked window pane. Abruptly a number of puzzling things had been cleared up and, apparently, in a way eminently satisfactory to the Ranger, judging from the pleased expression in his long green eyes. Suddenly he chuckled softly.

"Takes a man to bring out the best in any woman," he told himself. "Now I know how she looks when she's honest to goodness happy, as any woman should be. But I'm still wonderin' if Abijam ever ain't plumb on the prod against everything and everybody."

He heard a slight sound behind him and turned swiftly. He caught a glimpse of flashing steel and instinctively flung up his

arm to ward off a blow.

But quick as the Lone Wolf was, he would not have been able to escape the vicious, upward-slashing stroke of the long knife. It was the silent, bewildering swift leap of a great shaggy body that saved him. A split second before the steel drove home the leap came, with all of the wolf-dog's ponderous weight and iron strength behind it.

The knife-wielder thudded to the ground, the shimmering blade flying wide. Lobo stood over him, his gleaming teeth bared, the low, ominous growl welling deep in his lungs.

Hatfield saw the great dog's muscles tense. He leaped forward, seized Lobo and dragged him back even as the clashing fangs tore at the prostrate man's throat.

"Easy, feller," he cautioned. "Yuh've done yore share. I'll take care of him now. Who the devil is it?"

A beam of light from the window falling on the livid face and glittering eyes of old Abijam answered the question. Hatfield reached down and jerked the oldster to his feet. Abijam, helpless in the Ranger's mighty grip, stood champing and glittering at him, apparently little affected by his near escape from having his throat torn out.

"What's the big notion?" Hatfield asked sternly.

"And what are you doin' sneakin' around in the dark and peekin' in folks' windows?" Abijam countered aggressively.

Abijam had some reason on his side, despite the sneakingly treacherous attack that conformed well with his facial expression and general attitude, Hatfield was forced to admit. He felt called upon to explain.

"I aimed to drop in a spell out of the rain," he said. "I heard somebody singin' and figgered I'd better take a look and see if I'd be buttin' in where I hadn't ought to. But why in blue blazes couldn't yuh ask a question before slingin' a knife at my back?"

"Folks that ask questions first hereabouts is liable to get 'em answered with hot lead," creaked Abijam. "Cuss that dog, anyhow! He's supposed to stand guard here. 'Stead of doin' that, he mighty nigh did for me."

"Reckon yuh come as nigh to takin' the big jump as yuh ever did," Hatfield agreed grimly.

Abijam grunted.

"Ain't no reason why yuh can't come in out of the wet," he said. "Ain't nobody in there but Mr. Lee. Reckon yuh know him."

"Reckon I do," Hatfield admitted. "Wait till I put my hoss under cover."

CHAPTER XV

Larry Hodge Scores

LOBO trotted along beside Hatfield while, keeping a watchful eye on Abijam, whose shambling figure was barely visible in the moonlight that was again seeping through the thinning cloud veil, as the Lone Wolf led Goldy to the stable. He saw that the golden horse was taken care of, then followed his surly guide into the house.

Both Kearney Lee and the girl, unaware of the stirring doings beneath the window, and who were now seated in the big chairs on either side of the hearth, glanced up quickly as the door opened. The girl gasped, and appeared decidedly startled, but Kearney Lee only smiled his thin, mocking smile, and there was a dancing light in his black eyes as they rested on the Ranger. He nodded cordially to Hatfield, who nodded back.

At this friendly interchange, the girl regained her composure. She spoke to Abijam, who was glowering in the background.

"I imagine Mr. Hatfield would welcome a cup of coffee," she suggested.

"Hrrmph!" said Abijam, and headed for the kitchen.

"Nice night for a ride," remarked Kearney Lee.

"Not bad," Hatfield agreed. "If there's somethin' worth ridin' for waitin' at the end of it."

"Yes, I've a notion we both feel the same about that," Kearney Lee replied. "I've heard you have a habit of riding in out of the dark. Miss Rita tells me you were here the other night."

"That's right," Hatfield agreed again.

Lee smiled, and did not further pursue the subject. The girl glanced wonderingly from one to the other, but apparently decided it would be useless to ask questions.

Shortly afterward, Abijam arrived with the coffee and a plateful of cakes. Hatfield enjoyed several cups and a cigarette, then stood up.

"Reckon I'll be ridin'," he said, and to the girl's polite question: "Nope, I won't stay

for the night, Miss Rita. Want to be in town in the mornin'."

He smiled down at Kearney Lee and held out his hand. Lee took it in a steely grip.

"I reckon we both understand things a little better, now," Lee remarked.

"Reckon that's so," Hatfield agreed. They shook hands warmly.

After the door closed on his tall form, the girl turned to Lee.

"Kearney," she said, "I can't understand that man. Those eyes! When he looks at you, they seem to be searching your very soul."

"I've an idea they are," Kearney Lee replied gravely. "And if you've got anything hidden away down deep that won't stand a going over—look out!"

Dawn was streaking the rain-washed sky with gold and scarlet and trembling rose when Hatfield reached Cordy. But he did not immediately seek his bed. He headed for the railroad telegraph office, where he sent a long message over the wires, a message that caused the operator, sworn to secrecy by the rules of his company, to stare at him in a startled way and with great interest.

The message was addressed to: "James G. Dunn, General Manager, C & P Railroad."

The stage-coach was still undergoing repairs, so Hatfield went to bed and slept till noon. Upon arising, he repaired to the Post-hole for some breakfast. He found old John Bruton hammering on the bar with the barrel of his old Smith & Wesson and spewing a steady stream of appalling profanity.

"I'll shoot him!" the cattle baron bellowed to all and sundry. "That low-lived, sneakin' lobo! I'll strip his hide and nail it to my barn door! I'll—"

"Who yuh makin' such big war talk about, suh?" Hatfield interrupted.

"Who?" bawled Bruton. "That cussed to blue-blazes Larry Hodge, that's who!"

"Come, come, suh," Hatfield remonstrated mildly. "No sense in gettin' so riled up over a business disagreement."

"Business disagreement, yore grandmother!" howled the lord of San Pedro. "Who the tarnation fire said anythin' about business? That speckled horntoad run off with my daughter! Read this!"

HE THRUST a crumpled paper at Hatfield. The Ranger smoothed it out and read:

> Larry and I were married in Creston this morning.
>
> Love,
> Helen

"That ganglin', no-account maverick!" exploded Bruton. "When this railroad business is finished, he won't have a roof over his head. And he married my daughter! When I get my hands on him I'll skin him up till he'll look like a barber pole!"

Hatfield repressed a grin with difficulty. His green eyes were as sunny as summer seas.

"I saw yore daughter once," he said. "She's a mighty purty girl, and strikes me she's a mighty sweet girl, too. I recollect hearin' somebody say she looks a mighty lot like her mother."

The expression in John Bruton's eyes changed suddenly. He stopped swearing, and his glance wandered about the room. Hatfield saw that his hard old mouth had become tender.

"That's right," he said slowly. "She's just the spittin' image of my Mary."

"I suppose yuh already owned the Boxed B when yuh married her?" Hatfield questioned.

"Shucks, no," grunted Bruton. "I was workin' for wages."

"And I reckon her pa thought it was all right when yuh come sparkin' her?"

"All right! The old pelican threatened to take a shotgun to me!"

"Yuh worked with him?"

"Worked with him! I worked for him! He owned the XT spread."

"I've heard of it," said Hatfield. "One of the biggest and richest ranches in Texas. But his daughter backed her judgment, throwed it all over and married the man she'd picked for the one she wanted, even if he was just a cowhand working for forty per. That right?"

"Reckon so," Bruton admitted.

"Yuh figger she ever regretted it?"

Bruton's eyes met the Ranger's squarely.

I know she never did," he declared. "We were mighty happy together, Hatfield."

"But of course," pursued the Ranger relentlessly, "her daughter couldn't be trusted to pick the man she wanted and stick by him when times were bad the same as when they were good."

Old John Bruton stared at his six-gun, fumbled it with his big hands, examined it

as if he had never seen such a thing before. Then he jammed it into its holster with vicious violence, and turned to the Ranger.

"Hatfield," he demanded querulously, "do yuh always get the best of folks?"

Before Hatfield could reply, the boyish grin that so changed the old cattle baron's face quirked his lips.

"Barkeep!" he bellowed, "haul out a bottle of that prime stuff yuh got hid under the bar. Reckon we're due for another celebration!"

While they were discussing their second drink, Kearney Lee, who had overheard the conversation, strolled up.

"Hatfield," he said, "remember that little talk we had a few days ago about folks in general? Well, I'm beginning to lean to the notion that perhaps you are right. The drinks are on the house."

After enjoying a "wedding breakfast" with the potential Grandpap Bruton, Hatfield went to the railroad telegraph office. The answer to the wire he sent Jaggers Dunn was awaiting him. It consisted of three words:

LETTER ON WAY

DUNN

Hatfield left the telegraph office looking decidedly pleased. . . .

THE lord of San Pedro did business in his own peculiar fashion. Boxed B beefs were noted as among the finest in Texas. Buyers vied with one another to obtain them, and they brought the best price the market afforded.

Bruton did not go to the buyers. They sought him out, in the spacious living room of his great casa. Here, before the ruddy glow of his fireplace, with the rich beams and paneling reflecting the light, Bruton transacted all his business affairs.

His kingdom of the San Pedro was a close-knit organization, and the canny Bruton handled all the transactions of his neighbors, all except the rebels headed by Larry Hodges, whose holdings were at the extreme north of the valley. Hodges and his friends, who had once been part of Bruton's feudal system, had kicked over the traces in the matter of the new railroad line, and had been outlawed by the highest authority as represented by Bruton.

Bruton was, in fact, a very overlord of the section, and as arrogant and self-sufficient as an overlord usually becomes in the course of years of undisputed sway.

The selling season was at hand and a buyer who represented a big company that stood well in John Bruton's graces arrived at the Boxed B to dicker for several large herds that would be got together by Bruton and his adjoining spread owners. The buyer enjoyed a good breakfast, smoked one of Bruton's excellent cigars, and got down to business.

After a period of sparring and estimating, the buyer opened a roomy valise and paid for the herds with thick packets of bills. A weight check would later care for any discrepancies in the estimate, but John Bruton always insisted on cash on the barrel head before deliveries, and got it. His word was absolutely inviolable and the purchasing companies were only too glad to deal with him on his own terms.

A certain amount of secrecy had featured the transaction. The buyer had been met at Creston, the railroad junction town, by Bruton's buckboard and a fast team the night before and whisked the forty-odd miles to the Boxed B casa under cover of darkness.

After the buyer departed on his trip back to the railroad, well-pleased with the success of his negotiations, John Bruton summoned the reckless but dependable Vinson twins from the bunkhouse, where they had been lounging about, awaiting his call. Jerry stowed the money in his saddle-bags and with Tom riding alert attendance, set out for Cordy and the bank.

The twins enjoyed the chore, which entailed little of hardship and, they felt, nothing of danger, besides the promise of a few hours of diversion in town. They rode at a good pace, mechanically keeping an alert eye on their surroundings.

Some five miles northwest of Cordy, the trail dipped and climbed a series of sags. There were thickets in the swales, and patches of grove. They were just passing through one of the swales when there was a crashing in the growth behind them. They whirled in their saddles, hands streaking to their guns—and were met by a storm of lead.

Jerry pitched from his hull without a sound, to lie huddled in the trail. Tom got his gun out, but never had a chance to use it. Even as he flung the Colt up, the world exploded inside his head to the accompani-

ment of blinding pain. He slumped forward on his horse's neck, half-paralyzed, the gun falling from his hand. With his last strength, he twined his fingers in the cayuse's coarse mane and drove his spurs home. With a squeal of anger, his big roan bolted.

Tom Vinson's horse was one of the best the Boxed B afforded, and Bruton's spread was famous for fine horses. With bullets whistling all about him and kicking up spurts of dust at his feet, the animal tore along the trail at a speed that swiftly distanced the half-dozen masked men who had ridden from the thicket.

Quickly the owlhoots gave up the pursuit, cursing at the mishap. They were greatly relieved, however, when they examined the plump saddle-bags of Jerry's rig. Working at top speed, they transferred the contents of the bags to their own and vanished into the brush.

Jerry Vinson lay where he had fallen, his bloody face buried in the dust of the trail, his patient horse standing over him.

CHAPTER XVI

Owlhoots Lose a Trick

YOUNG Tom Vinson never completely lost consciousness, although his half-paralyzed body was incapable of anything other than remaining in the saddle of his speeding horse. The horse, seeming to understand what was expected of him, never lessened his gait until he crashed into Cordy and was caught at the Posthole Saloon, where he was accustomed to being hitched.

Five minutes later, Sheriff Dawson, Jim Hatfield, who had been in the sheriff's office at the time, and Ladder Lane, the chief deputy, were listening to the story Tom Vinson gasped out before passing out at last. Tom had an ugly gash in his scalp just above his left ear, a hole through his right shoulder, and a bullet in the calf of his left leg. But Doc McChesney, after a swift examination, believed he would pull through. Doc immediately saddled up and, accompanied by two volunteers, set out to see if anything could be done for Jerry.

Sheriff Dawson swore in three men as special deputies. With Hatfield and Ladder Lane, the men got the rigs on their horses in hot haste and thundered out of town along the Perdida.

"If we can make the hills before they do, we'll have the sidewinders," said the sheriff. "They'll have to use the Perdida to take to the hills. No other way for them. They got a start on us, but mebbe we can run 'em down. Sift sand, boys, sift sand!"

Five miles outside of town, Jim Hatfield suddenly reined in, and barked an order to the others.

"We're turning northwest here," he said.

"What's the big notion?" squealed Sheriff Dawson indignantly. "Who's givin' the orders hereabouts?"

"I am, right now," Hatfield told him quietly. "I'm following a hunch, and I believe it's a straight one. Yuh'll never catch them hellions up by ridin' the Perdida. This way we've got a chance, I'll bet my last peso. We're headin' for the hills a few miles north of the trail. Come on! We haven't any time to waste!"

Sheriff Dawson swore violently. He stared at the tall cowboy who had usurped all the authority in sight. Ladder Lane's quiet voice interrupted his flow of querulous profanity.

"We're follerin' Jim's lead, Neale," he said. "About all the brains in this outfit are inside that black head of his. Shut up, and let somebody do the thinkin' that knows how."

Sheriff Dawson grumbled and sputtered, but nevertheless he turned his horse and rode stirrup to stirrup with Hatfield's great sorrel as Goldy pointed his nose northwest.

For some miles Hatfield led the posse north by west, then veered until they were riding directly toward the loom of the Robber Hills. They were perhaps two miles from the first slopes of the grim battlements when he headed Goldy into the fringe of a dense thicket. From it the prairie, north and east, could be clearly seen for some distance.

"Here's a good place to hole up," he announced. "If my hunch is straight, and I figger it is, we'd ought to get some results in the next half hour."

Lounging comfortably in their saddles and smoking, the possemen waited, their eyes fixed on the crest of a rise a mile or so to the northeast. Suddenly Ladder Lane uttered a sharp exclamation. As if manipulated by hidden strings, a horseman had risen above the crest of the sag. Another and another followed, riding at a leisurely pace,

until Hatfield counted six in all.

"It's them," he told the others. "Steady now, and on yore toes. Unless I'm a heap mistook, there'll be fireworks. Wait till they're close. The way they're headed, they'll pass less'n a score of yards to the left."

Tense and ready, quivering with eagerness, the posse waited. The leisurely riding horsemen were directly opposite the thicket when the peace officers crashed from the growth. Sheriff Dawson's voice rang out:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Elevate! Yuh're covered!"

THERE was a startled yelp, a volley of oaths. But the horsemen did not obey the order. With one accord they went for their guns.

But they never had a chance. The rifles of the posse spurted flame and smoke. A storm-blast of death mowed them down as if a giant had taken a swipe at them with a great scythe. Before the wind had swirled the smoke clouds away, six riderless horses were milling about. Six motionless figures lay on the ground.

The possemen dismounted and caught up the horses. Sheriff Dawson exclaimed with satisfaction as the saddle-bags of one of the dead men yielded the thick packages of banknotes the cattle buyer had paid over for John Bruton's beefs. Then he examined the bodies of the slain owlhoots.

Ladder Lane stared perplexedly at two dark, twisted faces covered with a thick stubble of black beard.

"I've seen these two hellions somewheres," Ladder declared. He knit his brows, and shook his head in a gesture of bafflement.

But the keener eyes of the Lone Wolf, with their uncanny ability to note and remember the slightest variation of feature or coloring, glowed with an exultant light.

"Yuh know," Ladder remarked thoughtfully, "I've a notion we've just about bagged Black Bart Clanton's outfit. Clanton never had more than ten men in his organization, accordin' to all reports. Jim here did for one back in the trail canyon, and these six makes seven. There can't be more'n two or three maverickin' around yet. Uh-huh, I figger we've just about cleaned out the whole nest of sidewinders."

"Yes," replied Hatfield, "but the head of the snake is still loose and livin', and that kind of a head don't have much trouble growin' a new body unless it's squashed pronto. We've still got a chore to do."

Sheriff Dawson and the others nodded agreement. But Ladder Lane gazed at Hatfield with the expression of a man who is trying to pin down in his mind something vague and elusive.

An exultant posse rode back to Cordy. Stowed in the sheriff's saddle-bags was the recovered money. Trailing behind were six led horses, each bearing the body of a dead owlhoot draped across its saddle.

Upon arriving at Cordy, they learned that Jerry Vinson was dangerously wounded but alive, and with a chance to recover.

Kearney Lee was not in the Posthole.

"Left here in one tearin' hurry this mornin'," the head bartender said. "Didn't tell where he was goin', but I've a notion it was Creston, the junction, from somethin' he said. . . ."

Although Jim Hatfield had had one hard ride already that day, nightfall again found him in the saddle and riding westward across the valley. The night was slightly overcast and black dark, the late moon not having yet risen. Wan starlight filtered through the shifting veil of cloud and shimmered the prairie with a wan glow.

Once or twice the silence was broken by material trains roaring past, for some work was still being done on the railroad construction job. Otherwise the stillness was complete. A brooding hush enfolded the wide stretches. The Ladrones loomed grim and menacing against the sky, and when Hatfield finally sighted Blaine Carnes' La Casa Espantosa, the square, rugged building looked even more sinister than on the night of rain and wind of his previous visit.

The gnarled oaks reached crooked arms to the sky, as if frozen in a position of agonized torture. The house itself was dark, but as Hatfield drew near, he heard a flesh-crawling sound emanating from it—the long-drawn howl of a dog.

There was something vaguely disquieting about the persistent howling. It seemed to hold a note of terror. Hatfield quickened Goldy's pace until he was in the shadow of the building. He swiftly dismounted, climbed the steps and knocked on the massive door.

HATFIELD'S knocking reverberated inside the building, with that lonely, unpleasant echo that always distinguishes a house without human occupancy. Only the

whining and snuffling of the dog responded to his insistent demand for entrance. The moon had risen now and cast a reddish light across the oaken door. Hatfield hesitated a moment, then turned the knob and pushed.

The door swung open, a little way, then caught. He pushed harder. The door moved, but seemed to be resisting his entrance, as if something were pressing steadily against the inside surface. The opening widened, and through it shot Lobo, the wolf-dog.

Lobo whined with joy, leaped up, rested his huge paws on Hatfield's chest and licked his face.

"Easy, feller," the Ranger cautioned, rubbing the shaggy head. "What's wrong here? Where is everybody?"

Lobo whined and shivered. Hatfield put him aside and shoved strongly against the door. This time it swung wide open with a rush, as if the obstruction within had suddenly been removed. The moonlight streamed in, and the first thing to catch Hatfield's eye was a boot. He uttered a sharp exclamation, and involuntarily stepped back.

The boot was suspended in the air, at such a height that it did not quite clear the opening door. It swung gently to and fro, like the pendulum of a clock that is about run down. The moonlight threw its grotesque, stealthily moving shadow across the floor.

His face suddenly bleak, Hatfield stepped into the room. He turned, and struck a match. The flame flickered up, and the Lone Wolf stood and stared with dilated eyes, heedless of the fire that scorched his fingers.

For the boot encased a leg, and the leg belonged to a man whose stiff body swung to and fro on the rope that encircled its neck and was secured to the stout staple driven into the beam above the door.

Flesh crawling, face clammily damp, Jim Hatfield strode to one of the bracket lamps fixed to the wall and lighted it. Then he turned and surveyed the hanged man.

The eyes that glared back at his were no longer glittering. They were glazed and unearthly. The toothless mouth hung open. One side of the shrunken jaw was grotesquely swelled. The head was twisted around at a horrid angle on the shoulders. All in all, old Abijam did not make a pretty corpse!

Hatfield's glance roved about the room, and fixed on a chair standing a little to one side of the door.

"That's how he got up there," he muttered. He measured the distance to the noose with interest.

Mounting the chair, he was able to reach the dead man's face. It was icily cold, the body was stiff.

"Been dead quite a while," the Ranger decided.

The swollen jaw interested him. He passed sensitive, exploratory fingertips along it and nodded, satisfied.

His first impulse was to cut the body down, but he refrained from acting upon it. That was a job for the coroner who would investigate Abijam's death. Also, it would be evidence that someone had entered the apparently deserted house since Abijam had cashed in.

Hatfield wondered about the girl. Taking down the bracket lamp, he made a thorough search of the house, instinctively dreading what he might find. But there was no trace of Rita Rosa. He entered a room that had undoubtedly been hers, and discovered half-open drawers and displaced wearing apparel, and other evidences of a hurried departure.

For some moments he surveyed the disordered room, thinking intently. Then suddenly his eyes glowed and a half-smile quirked his lips.

"I bet that's it," he chuckled. "Yes, suh, I bet my last peso I know right where to find the little gal. Well, that's as it should be, and takes a chore off my hands."

Still chuckling, he descended to the living room, where the grisly presence over the door quickly stifled all mirthful inclinations.

Lobo had paced Hatfield during his course. He looked up at the Ranger with trusting eyes and gravely wagged his tail.

"Can't leave you here alone, feller," Hatfield told him.

He pondered a moment, then took a chair and crashed the glass from one of the windows.

"Now it'll look like yuh got tired of stayin' here and trailed yore twine," he told his canine companion. "Let's get that door shut again and head for town. Nothin' more we can do here."

The dog whined as Jim Hatfield strode toward his horse. Lobo apparently did not wish to leave. The dog had to be coaxed.

"We'll be comin' back, pardner," the Lone Wolf spoke to canine. "This is not the finish for us. But there's work to be done."

When he mounted, Lobo followed him.

CHAPTER XVII

By Special Request

JIM HATFIELD rode across the San Pedro Valley with Lobo gamboling alongside Goldy. The smell of dawn was in the air when he reached Cordy, although it was still dark. He saw that Goldy's wants were taken care of, placed Lobo in his room and rustled some chuck for the dog from a lunch counter that was still open for business. Then he went to bed and slept soundly for several hours. The stage would not pull out for Alpen until afternoon.

With Lobo trotting at his heels, he entered the Posthole and glanced around. Kearney Lee was not in sight. Hatfield asked no questions relative to the owner's whereabouts. Without hesitation he mounted the stairs and knocked on the door of the room he had been told Lee occupied.

Kearney Lee opened the door, on his face a look of polite inquiry. Hatfield glanced over his shoulder and saw Rita Rosa sitting in a chair and looking radiantly happy.

"Howdy, ma'am," the Ranger greeted her. "Thought yuh might miss yore dog, so I brought him to yuh."

He stepped aside and Lobo walked sedately into the room and rested his head on the girl's knee.

"Come in, come in," Lee invited heartily. "Hatfield, you did know Miss Rosa. But now I want you to meet Mrs. Kearney Lee. We were married last night. Routed Judge Arbaugh out of bed to perform the ceremony."

Hatfield did not evince the slightest surprise at this interesting statement.

"Congratulations, Kearney," he said, "and all the happiness in the world to you, Rita. Looks like San Pedro Valley is doin' a boomin' marriage business of late."

"But how did you get Lobo away from the house?" the girl asked. "I wouldn't have thought Abijam would have let him go."

In a few terse sentences, Hatfield related what he had found in La Casa Espantosa the night before. Kearney Lee swore under his breath. The girl turned white to the lips, and her great eyes dilated.

"I suppose he did it because I—escaped him," she said in a quivering voice. "My stepbrother ordered him to keep a watch on me and never let me leave the house. I tricked him yesterday. Lured him into a closet and locked him in. Kearney was waiting for me in the grove east of the house. We rode to town double. But how in the world did Abijam get out of that closet? I thought he'd have to stay there until Blaine Carnes visited the house and let him out. Blaine wasn't due at the house until today, or so he told me."

Hatfield did not see fit to make a conjecture and answer the question. Instead, he asked one of his own.

"How did yuh come to be livin' in Carnes' house, Rita?"

"He is the only relative I have in the world, since my mother died last year," Rita replied. "I hadn't seen him for years, not since I was a little girl. He came back to Arizona, looked me up and told me he was in business in Texas and wanted me to come and look after his house for him. He was kind enough to me, at first. But those terrible men who work for him would come to the house at night to drink and gamble.

"I was frightened to death of them, and wanted to leave. But he refused to let me, and set old Abijam to guard me. I never got to see anybody, until Kearney came to the house. At first, I was afraid of him, just as I was afraid of you. But I soon got over that, and Kearney planned to get me away.

"You see, until yesterday, Blaine was my legal guardian. He got himself appointed my guardian by the court back home, said it would be a protection for me. Yesterday I became of age."

Hatfield nodded, understanding how the canny Carnes could use such a weapon to intimidate a young girl ignorant of legal technicalities.

"How come Carnes allowed you to visit Rita, Lee?" Hatfield asked curiously.

KEARNEY LEE shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Carnes wanted me to invest money in his freighting business," Lee replied. "I went to the house the first time out of curiosity. I saw Rita there. After that—well, I guess I strung Carnes along. In fact, I did lend him considerable money. I didn't care to get into the freighting business, but I figured the money would be well invested, seeing it gave me a chance to visit Rita. Carnes couldn't very well refuse, under the circumstances."

"Men are so stupid where women are con-

cerned," Rita said. "I pretended, when Blaine or Abijam were around, to dislike Kearney. Blaine never caught on."

"A poor hombre hasn't got a chance when a smart woman sets out to twirl a loop for him," Hatfield chuckled. But almost instantly his face became grave. "Keep her out of sight for a few days, Lee," he cautioned. "The dog, too. Neither of yuh know just what yuh're up against. If Carnes comes to yuh askin' questions, don't know anything. And tell Judge Arbaught to keep his mouth shut about marryin' yuh!"

Kearney Lee's brows drew together, but after a glance at the Ranger's face, he nodded.

"I suppose you know what you're talking about," he replied. "I've an idea you have good reasons for asking what you do."

"I have," Hatfield said tersely.

He patted Lobo's head, smiled down at them from his great height, and left the room. . . .

The following afternoon, after returning to Cordy from Alpen, on the stage, Hatfield

[*Turn page*]

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repaired to the post office. He found a letter awaiting. As he read the words scrawled on expensive bond paper, in a handwriting like a barbed wire railing, his green eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"Now I can twirl my twine!" he exulted. "If my hunch is straight, and I'm willin' to bet my last peso it is, I'm just about ready to drop my loop."

He hunted up Sheriff Dawson, whom he found morose and gloomy.

"How's things on the railroad job?" he asked.

"Bad to worse," growled Dawson. "Work's practically at a standstill. They ain't got half the men they need, and the ones they have got ain't gettin' enough rock down to put in yore eye. They got testin' crews goin' over the ground all the time, but they don't find anythin'. And before a jigger will stick a pick in, he squints the ground with a magnifyin' glass. The train crews are so jumpy they've had half a dozen smashups of one kind or another that there wasn't a bit of sense in. Nothin' over bad, so far, but it shows the shape folks are in out there."

He paused to worry off a sizable hunk of tobacco from a hefty plug.

"The C and P directors refused to vote any more money to keep the project goin'," he went on then. "They say, the way things are goin', the C and P is bound to lose them mail and express contracts to the T and W, up north, and with that bein' so, all the need for hustlin' is over. The road can afford to do that—abandon the new line for a spell—but it means that the boys around here are due to lose every cent they put in the project."

He paused again to stare gloomily out the window.

"I'm gettin' the blame for not clearin' things up," he added. "If tomorrow was election day, I wouldn't get enough votes to count on yore fingers. And next month is election month, and I already got a jigger announcin' he's goin' to run agin me."

"Who?" Hatfield asked with interest.

"Blaine Carnes. Blaine says he can straighten things out if he's give the authority. Reckon he'll be the next sheriff, all right. Folks are itchin' for a change, any kind of a change. They figger things can't get any worse."

Hatfield's lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"They figger wrong," he remarked grimly.

"Mebbe," Dawson agreed. "But they're shore bad enough now. The stockholders of the new railroad line aim to hold a meetin' tomorrow night, in the big office above the railroad station. Carnes is goin' to be there. Claims he has somethin' to say that they'll find interestin'."

"I've a notion I'll be there, too," Hatfield said, "and you'll be with me."

"I ain't got no business there," Dawson grunted in reply. "Besides, I ain't been invited to attend."

"I haven't either," Hatfield admitted, and smiled slightly.

SHERIFF DAWSON puzzled over that smile, after Hatfield departed.

"I can't make that big jigger out," he complained querulously to Ladder Lane.

"Reckon yuh got company," Ladder replied dryly.

The sun was setting in scarlet and gold when Jim Hatfield rode out of Cordy, headed west. The crests of the Ladrones were flaming purple, their giant shoulders swathed in robes of royal blue. The canyons were violet mysteries as the shadows curdled in their depths. The whole western sky, a-fleck with high, scattered clouds, was a shattered rainbow as the sun vanished behind the grim battlements of the Robber Hills.

Far to the south, the Chisos were misty and unreal, with the broad sweep of the Lost Desert a canvas upon which the Master Painter splashed his colors with reckless abandon and such beauty that to look upon it was an exquisite agony. Slashed with silver, bathed in gold, the rangeland rolled northward to the thin, fine line of the horizon.

Lonely and deserted, the Perdida Trail flowed its steel-gray ribbon westward, with the shimmering twin ribbons of the railroad paralleling it for miles, then veering southward and vanishing into the black mouth of the cut.

When Hatfield reached the mouth of the cut, the kaleidescope of color had faded to a monotone of dusty ash below and shadowy blue above, pricked out with the silver needle-points of the stars. Without hesitation he rode into the cut. He did not draw rein until he was before the shack the chief construction engineer used for an office. A light burned within.

Hatfield dismounted, and entered without knocking. The nervous little engineer

glanced up from his desk, considerably startled as the Lone Wolf's tall form loomed in the doorway. He stared for a moment before finding his tongue.

"Good evening," he said at length. "What can I do for you?"

Before replying, Hatfield drew up a chair and sat down.

"I noticed as I rode up the cut, suh, that there are more than a dozen cars, loaded with crossties, on the siding," he said. "Them ties were teamed to Cordy from the northern end of the valley, wasn't they?"

"That's right," the engineer agreed wonderingly.

"Well," said Hatfield, "I want them ties unloaded tonight, and spaced out on the ground so's they can be given a thorough examination."

The engineer stared, as if firmly convinced that he was holding converse with a lunatic.

"Why—why—" he stuttered. "Why, are you out of your mind, or something?" He flushed, grew angry. "Who are you, anyhow, to come into my office and make such a preposterous demand?"

Hatfield smiled at the flustered little man.

"Remember, suh, yuh asked me what yuh could do for me, when I come in," he reminded. But before the engineer could reply, he became grave. "The matter is nothing to joke about, suh," he said. "It's deadly serious, even though it sounds loco to you. My name is Hatfield, James J. Hatfield, and I have a letter to show yuh."

He drew a folded sheet from his pocket, spread it out on the desk and shoved it under the engineer's eyes. The construction man's glance dropped to it, he read the few words scrawled in jagged handwriting:

> Orders issued by the bearer of this document, James J. Hatfield, are to be obeyed without question, implicitly, and at once.

Appended to the missive was the unmistakable signature of General Manager James G. Dunn.

The engineer raised his bewildered eyes from the document and stared at Hatfield.

"Why—why, I never experienced anything like this in my life!" he said.

"And I reckon, suh, yuh never experienced anything similar to what yuh have on this job durin' the past few months."

Before the man could reply, he hurried on: "I am here, suh, by special request of General Manager Dunn, to try and straighten things out and to find out who is causin' all the trouble. I think I've found out, but I still have to prove it. What yuh'll do for me tonight will go a long ways toward provin' what I believe to be true is true. I'll explain everything later.

"Right now we have no time to waste. Get a gang together and start 'em unloading them cars. Get all the light yuh can—lanterns, torches. We've got a chore to do if this railroad is goin' to be built through the Ladrone Hills. Before mornin', I figger we'll know about that, one way or the other. Let's go!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A Hard Proposition

URGED on by the promise of double pay and the following day off, the men chosen by the engineer turned out from their camp cars and went to work. The ties were unloaded and laid in rows. Hatfield and the engineer examined them with meticulous care, one by one.

Hour after hour they labored, with barren results. The first rose of dawn was staining the eastern sky when Hatfield uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Look at this, suh," he said to the engineer. "I believe we've hit it!"

The construction man held a torch close and peered at the almost unnoticeable opening in its surface some ten inches from the end of the tie. With the greatest care, Hatfield inserted the point of his knife and scratched. A gleam of metal rewarded his efforts.

"This is it," he said. "Just how it works, I don't know as yet, but we'll find out, if we last that long. Tell the men to go back to their camp cars down the cut, and to stay there. Post a couple of foremen to see that the order is obeyed. I don't want anybody within a couple hundred yards of the shack that houses yore office."

The order was given. The wondering hands obeyed, shuffling off through the first faint morning light. When the last was out of sight, Hatfield picked up the tie and shouldered it.

"I want yuh to get me some tools, suh,"

he told the engineer. "A saw, a light hammer, a plane and a wood chisel will do."

While the engineer sought the tools, Hatfield carried the tie into the office and deposited it on the engineer's desk. He moved all available lights close to the desk. By this time the engineer had returned with the needed tools. Hatfield took them and laid them on the desk beside the crosstie. Then he turned to his companion.

"All right, suh," he said. "Now you toddle along with the men. If somethin' should go wrong, this whole shebang will be blown into the next county."

The nervous little engineer swelled like a bantam rooster sensing a fight. He glared up at the tall Ranger.

"You go to blazes!" he said.

Jim Hatfield grinned, his eyes as sunny as the noonday prairie. He patted the engineer on the shoulder.

"Good man!" he said. "Not bigger'n a penny, but sound money just the same. All right, we'll take our chances together."

Handling the tools gingerly, they went to work. Hatfield sawed off the end of the tie nearest the small aperture through which the gleam of metal could be seen, and found nothing. He tried it again, a little farther along the oaken beam, with likewise barren results. A third attempt, however, an inch or so beyond the small hole, rewarded him with a sudden screech of the saw's teeth on metal. The engineer gasped, and stiffened.

"Gettin' hot," the Lone Wolf remarked coolly. "Somewheres between this and the far end we'll find it. Just about the middle, I'd say. Bring the light closer and let's make a try with the plane."

A few minutes of work and the outer surface of the tie was shaved off, revealing the white, close-grained wood. Hatfield laid the plane aside and closely examined the smooth surface.

"Look," he said to the engineer.

The man, bending close, could clearly see a fine line of juncture that formed a rectangle in the surface of the wood cleared of the rough outer fibres.

Hatfield picked up the chisel and the hammer.

"Now comes the ticklish part," he remarked.

With a steady hand he fitted the sharp point of the chisel against the hair-line jointure. With swift, sure strokes of the hammer he drove the chisel into the tiny crack. The engineer held his breath, and clenched his hands until his nails bit into his clammily damp palms.

HATFIELD dropped the hammer and levered on the chisel, putting forth more and more of his strength. A section of wood rose slowly from the parent body of the tie. Higher and higher, until at one end an opening was revealed.

"Careful," cautioned the engineer. "There's the fuse!"

"And the cap," Hatfield returned in unperturbed tones. A moment more, and he said: "And there's the charge. Look, it's wrapped in felt to prevent a chance jar setting it off. Now let's see if we can figger how the darn things work."

He examined the infernal machine carefully, his black brows drawing together. Suddenly his face cleared.

"I got it," he exclaimed. "Of all the devilish contrivances! Do yuh see it?"

The engineer whistled softly through his teeth.

"The man who rigged this up is a genius without a trace of conscience!" he declared.

"Uh-huh, a regular *ladino* with plenty of wrinkles on his horns," Hatfield agreed.

He bent over the tie and sniffed sharply.

"Creosote," he explained the peculiarly pungent odor the tie exhaled. "The wood was soaked in creosote. That was to expand the fibres. When the creosote finally dries out, the wood contracts, which helps make the darn thing work."

He straightened his aching back and dusted the particles of wood from his hands. The engineer wiped his damp face.

"Keep this thing locked up," Hatfield told him. "It will be needed as evidence, if the hellion ever comes to trial." He added grimly: "I have my doubts about that, though. He ain't the sort that dances on nothin' at a rope's end."

He smiled at the little engineer, and nodded with satisfaction.

"Now yuh can go back to building railroad, suh," he said. "Only I'd advise that first yuh remove every rail that's been laid in the cut and give the ties a careful lookin' over."

"I'll do that," the engineer declared emphatically. "And now what do you aim to do?"

"Finish my chore," Hatfield replied briefly. "Yuh'll be hearin' from me soon. And re-

member, none of the men here are to be allowed to leave the camp until after tomorrow. That's plumb important. I'm dependin' on yuh to see to it that they don't."

"You're talking for General Manager Dunn," the engineer replied, "and people who desire to retain their peace of mind are not negligent in obeying his orders. Good luck to you, Mr. Hatfield."

With the morning sun drenching the rangeland in liquid gold, Hatfield rode eastward across the valley. He glanced to the north as he left the mouth of the cut. Crowning its hilltop with its grim presence, La Casa Espantosa, house of death, stood grim and mysterious. Hatfield's lips tightened as he thought of the sinister old man whose body hung from the staple over the massive door, where nearly six and thirty years before, another man of mystery had died at his own hand.

"I'll send the coroner out to get him tomorrow," the Ranger told himself, thinking of old Abijam.

It was well past noon when he reached Cordy. He enjoyed a good meal, went to his room over the stalls and carefully cleaned and oiled his guns, making sure that every part was in perfect working order and that the sixes were free in their sheaths. Then he repaired to the Posthole to keep an appointment with John Bruton and Kearney Lee.

For some time the three sat at a table and talked. At first Bruton's face was stubborn, but as Hatfield spoke at length, the cattle baron's expression changed. From time to time he voiced profane astonishment and seemed utterly bewildered. Kearney Lee, on the other hand, did not appear unduly surprised at what the Ranger had to tell them.

FINALLY, Bruton threw up his hands in a gesture of resignation. He glanced questioningly at Kearney Lee. The saloonkeeper nodded.

"If Jim says it's the right thing to do, I guess it is," he said.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," growled Bruton. "But Hatfield always gets the best of folks. Come on, Lee, let's go over to the bank. We'll do this thing right, now that Hatfield has decided us to do it."

A gloomy group of cattlemen, headed by young Larry Hodge, comprised the stockholder's meeting in the office above the station. They sat about and said little, until Hodge called the meeting to order.

"Looks like we're hogtied," the Bar H owner told the gathering. "The C and P directors refuse to vote money to continue the project at this time, and there is no way we can raise the money ourselves. The banks hold all of our paper they will take."

"Shore looks like the banks will be in the cattle business mighty soon," an old rancher interpolated grimly. "Hope I haven't forgot how to twirl a rope. Figger I'll be packin' one again before long. That is, if anybody'll sign up a old coot with stiff joints."

Hodge nodded gloomily.

"Reckon there's more'n one of us will be ridin' that trail," he agreed. "I don't care much for myself—I'm young—but I feel mighty bad about talkin' you fellers into this mess."

"You didn't talk us into it, Larry," the old cattleman replied kindly. "We went in with our eyes open. Nobody can tell which way a bullfrog will jump before he stretches his legs. This thing looked mighty good when we began it. I still figger a railroad is just what this section needs, and I figger that sooner or later it's goin' to be built—only us fellers won't have no part in it. By the way, where's that feller that owns the freight wagons—Blaine Carnes? He said he was goin' to be here and would have a proposition to make us."

"Expectin' him any minute, now," said Hodge. "I figger he'll show up, all right. Seemed mighty anxious to attend the meetin', when I talked with him. Here comes Bob Wilkes, the bank cashier. He'll represent the bank's interest. Hello, Bob, how's everything?"

Wilkes returned the greeting and sat down. There was a peculiarly expectant expression in his eyes and he seemed to be laboring under repressed excitement. When Blaine Carnes arrived a few minutes later, accompanied by two hard-faced, hulking individuals—his wagon superintendent and camp foreman—Wilkes tensed in his chair and his thin, white fingers nervously tapped the table top in front of him.

Carnes took the chair assigned him at the head of the table. He wore a complacent look and his pale eyes glowed. His two companions sat down on either side of him. After being introduced to the gathering by Larry Hodge, he rose to his feet, towering over most of the seated men.

"I came here to make you gents an offer," he began, without preamble. "I know just how yuh stand. Yuh hired the money from the banks to put into this railroad business, givin' yore ranches as security. The railroad builders fell down on the job and yuh all stand to go busted. That right?"

Despondent nods answered the question. Carnes' eyes gleamed.

"Money's tight now," he continued. "The banks won't give yuh any more extensions, and there ain't any place yuh can get the money yuh need to tide yuh over. Yuh stand to lose everythin'. So I'm here to make yuh an offer. I've made some money in my freightin' business, and it looks like the business will hold up longer'n I expected a while back. I'm willin' to do a little gamblin' with what money I got. If some day the railroad decides to finish the line, mebbe I'll get my money back. I'm willin' to buy up yore stock, at ten cents on the dollar. I'd offer more, but that's all the money I got."

CHAPTER XIX

Not Smart Enough

ELECTRIFIED, stunned silence greeted Carnes' words. The cattlmen glanced at one another, stroked their chins with fumbling fingers, hesitated. Bob Wilkes, the bank cashier, sat tense on the edge of his chair. From time to time he glanced toward the closed door. He seemed to be holding his breath in nervous expectancy.

It was the old rancher who finally broke the silence.

"Well," he said, " a few crumbs is better'n no bread at all. We didn't expect to save anythin'. The couple thousand I'd get would tide me over till I can tie onto a job of ridin' somewheres. I say we take Carnes' offer, and thank him for makin' it."

The others nodded glumly—all but young Larry Hodge. He bitterly hated to relinquish his dream of progress and prosperity. For some minutes he sat deep in thought, his face slightly haggard, his usually sparkling, reckless eyes dull. The others stared at him expectantly. He met their concerted gaze defiantly for a moment, then resignedly shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said, his voice flat and lifeless. "I'll string along with the rest of yuh and make it unanimous."

"Fine," said Carnes. "I got the papers all made out proper and legal by Judge Arbaugh. Read 'em over, gentlemen, and sign. There's pen and ink there beside yuh, Hodge."

In sober silence the ranchers read the complicated agreements of transfer, the oldsters spelling out the unfamiliar words laboriously. Larry Hodge scarcely glanced at them. He seemed too depressed to care what he was signing. Blaine Cranes watched, a slight smile twisting the lips of his hard mouth. Wilkes shifted nervously in his chair, and cast worried glances at the door.

Hodge was the first to sign, writing his name down firmly. The others scratched away with the pen in turn. Carnes then signed a check on the Cordy bank for the required amount and handed it to Wilkes, who took it with seeming reluctance.

Carnes sat back in his chair, an exhultant gleam in his pale eyes. His smile had broadened.

"Well," he said loudly, "I reckon that's about all."

"Not quite!" a voice contradicted.

The group at the table glanced around, startled. The door had swung open on noiseless hinges. Framed in the opening was the tall figure of Jim Hatfield. Crowding close behind him where Sheriff Dawson, Deputy Ladder Lane, John Bruton, and Kearney Lee.

Hatfield stepped into the room. His face was as bleak as the granite cliffs of the Robber Hills. His eyes were icily gray. On his broad breast gleamed a silver star set on a silver circle—the feared, honored and respected badge of the Texas Rangers.

"Good gosh!" somebody exclaimed. "That feller's a Ranger!"

Bob Wilkes let out an exultant whoop.

"I've got him placed!" he bawled. "I knew I'd seen him somewhere. That's the Lone Wolf!"

Heedless of the stir Wilkes' statement aroused, Jim Hatfield never took his eyes off Blaine Carnes' livid face.

"In the name of the State of Texas!" his voice rang out, edged with steel. "I arrest for robbery and murder, Blaine Carnes, known also as Black Bart Clanton! Anything you may say, Carnes, can be used against—"

The last word was drowned by the crash of Carnes' overturned chair as he leaped to

his feet, hand streaking to his heavy gun. He got the six from its holster, flung it up.

But even as he "reached," Jim Hatfield's slim hands flashed down. Flame spurted from the muzzles of his Colts. The room rocked to the thundering reports.

The unfired gun falling from his dead hand, Blaine Carnes slumped back across his overturned chair and crashed to the floor. Hatfield's gun roared again and Carnes' wagon superintendent, gun in hand, spun around with a gasping cough and fell. The camp foreman threw up his hands and howled for mercy. Sheriff Dawson hurried forward to secure the prisoner.

HOLSTERING his guns, Hatfield strode to the head of the table. He picked up the sheaf of signed agreements, tore them across twice and threw the fragments on the floor.

"Sit down again, gents," he invited the gibbering occupants of the room, as calmly as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "John Bruton and Kearney Lee have something to say to yuh."

"And I reckon after what happened next, yuh could have knocked over every one of them jiggers with a feather," Sheriff Dawson later recounted. "Old John steps up to the head of the table and glares at them gents, and they glared back, sort of like a passel of cats at a strange dog. Reckon they figgered John was goin' to tell 'em off proper. Then all of a sudden old John grins, and yuh know when John Bruton grins, it's mighty hard to keep from grinnin' back.

" 'Gents,' he says, 'I shore never figgered to do what I'm doin' tonight, any more'n you ever figgered me to do it, but this jigger Hatfield has a way of always gettin' the best of folks, whether it's with guns, fists or talkin'. He talked me into it. So me and Kearney Lee are puttin' up the money to finish yore cussed railroad. We fixed it up with Bob Wilkes this afternoon and the money's in the bank waitin' to be used. Now s'pose we all trail down to the Posthole for a drink, so's Lee can get some of his money back. And as for you, Hodge, I'm expectin' you over to my place tomorrer night for a surroundin' of chuck, and—bring yore wife along!' "

After a session of good fellowship in the Posthole, Hatfield sat in the Sheriff's office and talked.

"Carnes was different than the general scrub lot of owlhoots," he observed. "Different in that he had brains, and imagination. Carnes saw clearly that the comin' of the railroad meant the end of such outfits as his, known as the Black Bart Clanton gang. He knew that it was only a matter of time until the railroad, and such aggregations of capital would exterminate the hole-in-the-wall outfits or reduce them to maverickin' outlaws with mighty slim pickin's to be had.

"Carnes decided he wasn't goin' to give up a fat and easy existence if he could help it. He couldn't buck the railroad, so he figgered to string along with it. In other words, he aimed to go respectable. His freightin' business was the first step. But he wasn't the sort that would be satisfied to be a little frog in the puddle. He had been a big frog in his own puddle, and he aimed to be a big frog in a bigger puddle.

"As I said, he saw clear enough that sooner or later the railroad would go through. He might be able to slow it up for a while, but progress is something altogether too big for any man or bunch of men to stop. He realized that the owners of stock in the new line were due to make big money in the end. So he decided that he was goin' to own stock in the new line. He wasn't any piker, either. He wouldn't be satisfied to be just a stockholder. He set out to be the stockholder, and he mighty nigh got by with it."

There was an emphatic nodding of heads.

"But like all owlhoots, he slipped up on little things," Hatfield said. "That, and having his past catch up with him. He had an organization, one of the worst set of owlhoots the Southwest ever knew. They were used to making big killin's, and not even Black Bart Clanton could hold 'em in. Clanton, as Carnes, a respectable citizen of the neighborhood, had to let 'em keep on operatin'. Of course he needed the money their jobs brought in, but every time the Clanton gang pulled off somethin' hereabouts, that made Carnes' job of goin' respectable that much harder. His former associations were something that, smart as he was in lots of ways, he didn't quite figger on. And as I said before, he kept slippin' up on little things."

JIM HATFIELD paused to roll a cigarette. After the smoke was going good, he went on speaking.

"One of them little things got me to thinking about Carnes mighty early in the game," he said. "Remember, Bruton, when you and

Carnes was talkin' together in the Posthole, about stoppin' the road from goin' through? Well, he used an expression then, an expression that attracted yore attention: 'If yuh want to catch a pike, yuh wouldn't use a pin-hook.' Remember?"

"Uh-huh, I do," replied Bruton. "I'd never heard that before."

"I doubt if many folks born and raised in Texas ever heard it before, either," Hatfield said. "That's a down-East expression. It struck me as mighty odd that a jigger claimin' to be born and raised in the Texas Panhandle where there never was a pike since the world began, should use it.

"I got to listenin' mighty close to Carnes when he was speakin'. He used other expressions that were out of character. He said "cal'late' for calculate. A Texan rarely ever uses the word at all, and if he does he pronounces it right. Carnes once spoke of 'hiring' money, a New England expression. A westerner would say 'borrow'. He tried hard to talk like a Texan, but every now and then he would slip up. All of which meant that Carnes came from some place other than the one he claimed.

"Well, I've learned that when a man tries to make out he come from some place he ddin't, he has somethin' to cover up, and an hombre with somethin' to cover up will always bear watchin'."

Sheriff Dawson nodded agreement, and reached for his tobacco.

"I didn't have any particular reason for suspectin' Carnes, at first," Hatfield went on. "Kearney Lee was the logical suspect, at first, with John Bruton stringin' along. I wasn't shore of Kearney for quite a spell. He had a habit of ridin' off and disappearin' at odd times.

"One time was the day I came nigh onto gettin' roasted up in that canyon, as I told yuh about. And that was the very day Lee had to pick to burn his hand while helpin' Rita make some coffee out to La Casa Espantosa. Things didn't look so good for Lee right then. But the night I trailed him across the San Pedro, I figgered, even before I found out he was takin' them mysterious rides just to visit Rita, that he didn't have anything to cover up."

"How was that?" Kearney Lee asked with interest.

"Well"— Hatfield smiled—"I trailed yuh for twenty miles, and all that time yuh didn't look over yore shoulder once. Yuh didn't give a darn if the whole Big Bend was amblin' along behind yuh. Which wouldn't be the way with a gent packin' a crooked load!"

CHAPTER XX

"Adios!"

FOR minutes Sheriff Dawson kept shaking his head in wordless admiration as Hatfield made clear much that had been puzzling them all. John Bruton nodded in approval. "That Ranger never misses a trick," murmured Bruton.

Hatfield chuckled.

"Yuh get to notice little things in Ranger work," he explained. "Little things, enough of them, stack up to somethin' big. As to Bruton, I mighty soon decided he wasn't mixed up in anything off-color. He just wasn't the sort. Couldn't get his hand into a barrel without making a noise. Schemin' and connivin' just wasn't in his line.

"I'd already decided that whoever was responsible for the dynamite explosions that were just about stallin' the construction work wasn't any maverickin' owlhoot hidin' out in the hills, like Clanton was supposed to do. I was weedin' out the suspected folks right along, till Carnes was just about the only one left. I was shore Carnes was off-color somehow after I made my first visit to La Casa Espantosa and met that scared girl and old Abijam, who had all the earmarks of being a plumb sidewinder, which he was. Then Carnes helped to clinch it by offering me that job as guard on the stagecoach."

"How'd yuh figger that?" asked Bruton.

"Valuable shipments are carried on that stage," Hatfield explained. "The guard has the shipments at his mercy. The first trip I made, the stage carried twenty thousand dollars. That's a lot of dinero to trust to an almost total stranger. Carnes handed out an argument about being able to pick men that were trustworthy, but that was goin' just a mite too far. I figgered he had a plumb good reason for wantin' me on that coach. He did have."

"And that reason?"

"He wanted to do me in. He'd already tried it a couple times. Tried it the very first

night I hit Cordy. Had one of his hellions throw lead at me out of the alley, right after they shot the construction man. Right then I knew somebody had spotted me for a Ranger. And Carnes mighty nigh did for me that day on the coach. That wheel comin' off was no accident."

"How yuh know that?"

Hatfield smiled slightly, and ran his fingers through his crisp black hair.

"Because," he said, "I found the threads of the axle had been run backwards so that the forward movement on the coach would loosen the nut, instead of holdin' it tight. On the level across the valley it didn't matter. Up the grade of the first slope, where the wheel would strain against the nut, started it comin' loose. Then the down grade and the turns of the cliff trail finished the job. It was almighty smart. Just plumb luck, I figger, that the whole shebang didn't foller the driver into the canyon."

"Luck, and handlin' a runaway team like not one in a hundred could handle it," Kearney Lee remarked dryly.

Hatfield smiled again.

"I examined the threads and found how they were run," he continued. "Then I burred them with a rock so's nobody else would notice. I didn't want anybody to catch on that it wasn't an accident, the wheel comin' off. Uh-huh, it was a smart trick, and meant plenty of savvy. Right then I knew for shore that the jigger who was out to get me—and I'd decided it was Carnes—was the same jigger who was settin' off them mysterious dynamite explosions. I knew I had to look for just the same kind of a smart trick where the explosions was concerned.

"Fixin' up that axle showed a certain knowledge of mechanics. I'd already decided that some sort of a mechanical contrivance was bein' used to set off the explosions, and I suspected it had somethin' to do with the crossties Carnes was hauling for the railroad. When I saw that car of ties blow up out in the cut, I knew it for shore. I knew the explosion occurred inside the car. It could not have happened under it."

"Why?" asked Bruton.

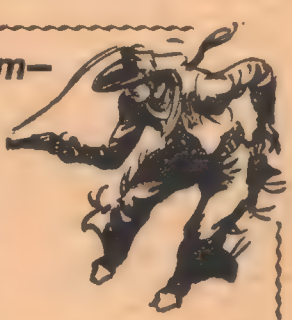
HATFIELD gave the lord of San Pedro his attention.

"The crater hollowed out was wide and shallow," he explained. "Not at all like the one left by the explosion beside the roundhouse here in Cordy. That proved that the dynamite went off some distance above the ground. When the engineer kicked that car of ties too hard, somehow or other, the loaded tie got just the right kind of a jolt to set off the dynamite packed inside of it."

"How was them explosions set off?" asked Dawson.

"By one of the smartest, most devilish contrivances I ever saw," Hatfield replied. "A tie was hollowed out carefully, so carefully that the slab of wood removed fitted back into place so that the line of juncture was practically invisible. Dynamite, capped and fused, was placed in the hollow. The dynamite was carefully wrapped in felt to protect it from the jars incidental to handlin'

"There Goes the Killer! Hurry, After Him—Catch Him! Don't Let Him Escape!"



THE pursuers were in full cry as they raced to shoot down Jim Hatfield in cold blood—for he hadn't been in Whichway more than several hours before word of his presence got around and the outlaw element was determined to do away with him!

But Hatfield faced it all—false murder accusations, killers in ambush, dozens of attempts to discredit him—shrugging off danger with a grin! He was on the track of a wily outlaw chieftain who planned to rule a vast empire on both sides of the Rio—and he gave his foes lead for lead in RANGE PIRATES, the exciting complete novel by Jackson Cole featured in next month's issue.

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the ties and spikin' the rails to 'em."

"And the jar of the trains going over the rails set off the charge," interrupted Bruton.

"Yes, but not in the way yuh think." Hatfield smiled. "The dynamite was so well protected that trains could have run over the ties till Judgment Day and not set it off."

His audience stared at him in bewilderment. Hatfield chuckled, and took time to roll another cigarette, evidently enjoying the suspense of his waiting listeners.

"The detonatin' contrivance was the real smart part of the darn thing," he said then. "A steel pin was closely fitted into a hole bored in the tie. The pin was slightly curved, and set at an angle to the surface. The dynamite, of course, had to be packed toward the center of the tie, so that when the rails were spiked to the tie, the spikes would not strike the charge and set it off.

"The head of the pin came exactly under where the steel tie plate would be set under the rail. Ties are of the same length, and are laid so's their ends are in line, so it was easy to figger where the head of the pin should come. The tie plate would be just touchin' the head of the pin. The point of the pin was a small distance from the dynamite cap."

Hatfield paused again, his eyes thoughtful, as if carefully choosing his words before resuming.

"As trains run over the rails, the weight pressin' down on the rail tends to gradually force the tie plate into the wood of the tie," he explained. "It takes time, but if yuh'll take a look at old ties yuh'll see that the plate has been forced down into the wood quite a ways. To make matters more certain, the hellion gave that part of the tie an extra heavy soakin' in creosote, mebbe forced the creosote into the wood under pressure.

"That tended to swell the wood fibres. The creosote would dry out slowly, and the fibres would compress. The tie plate would grind deeper and deeper into the wood, forcin' the point of the pin down against the cap. Finally a time would come when the weight of a passin' train or engine would jam the pin point hard against the cap. The cap would explode and set off the charge. Simple, but mighty smart."

His listeners sat silent, digesting what had been said. Bruton at length broke the silence.

"Some mighty ornery sidewinders in the world," the lord of San Pedro observed.

"And sometimes with plenty of savvy," Sheriff Dawson added. Then suddenly he asked: "How come yuh to tie Carnes up as Black Bart Clanton?"

"Well," replied Hatfield, "for one thing I learned that nobody had seen Black Bart any place since about the time Carnes showed up in the section, although it was said his gang had been operatin' hereabouts all that time. Nobody ever did get a real good look at Clanton, but Carnes answered his description purty well, except for black whiskers, and whiskers can be shaved off.

"In fact, Carnes' face had the look of a face that had been covered by whiskers for a long time. If yuh looked close, yuh could see that the color shaded off below his cheekbones. Then there was his name. It's a peculiarity of owlhoots to pick false names that sound sort of alike. A feller by the name of Stone will call himself Flint. Walters will become Watson, and so on. Bart Clanton and Blaine Carnes ain't so very different.

"But what made me shore Clanton and Carnes were the same was what I found out the day we downed them hellions who shot the Vinson boys and lifted Bruton's cattle money. Everybody in the posse agreed that they were part of the Clanton gang. Ladder Lane said he'd seen two of 'em somewheres before. So had I, without the couple weeks' growth of whiskers they had on their faces when they died. I recognized 'em right off as two of Carnes' teamsters I saw in the Posthole on pay-day."

LADDER LANE let out a shout of discovery.

"By gosh, that's right!" he exclaimed. "It was a couple of them freighters! I remember 'em now. Feller, yuh don't miss anythin', do yuh?"

"Always gettin' the best of folks!" grunted Bruton. "But, Jim, how did yuh figger out the hellions that shot the Vinsons would come the way they did instead of headin' straight for the hills?"

"Because," Hatfield said, and smiled, "I figgered they'd head for La Casa Espantosa. It was their logical hangout, where they cached their loot—the home of respectable Mr. Carnes, where nobody would think of 'em headin'. I've a notion, Sheriff, when yuh go out to cut down old Abijam, yuh'll find quite a bit of dinero looted from the bank on pay-day night."

"Why did old Abijam hang hisself?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"He didn't," Hatfield replied. "Carnes hung him, or rather hung his body to make it look like Abijam did hisself in. When Carnes come home and found Abijam had let Rita Rosa escape, he evidently flew off the handle and began workin' over Abijam. Killed him, all right, with a blow of his fist, the chances are. When I examined Abijam, I found his jaw had been busted, and his neck, too, but not by the rope. The break was too high up for that. The rope was around Abijam's neck, all right, but his neck was hardly swelled at all. It would have been if he had died by hangin'.

"Besides, the noose was so high above the floor that Abijam could never have got it around his neck by standin' on the chair he was supposed to have stood on. Another of the little slips owlhoots make. Carnes, a tall man, could reach the noose by standin' on the chair. He forgot Abijam was short. He should have put a box on the chair. Then mebbe I wouldn't have got suspicious about the hangin'."

Hatfield stood up, smiling down at the group.

"Yes, Carnes was smart, all right," he repeated. "Had plenty of savvy. Even brought his stepsister over from Arizona, where her mother came from before she married Carnes' father, back East. Brought her to take care of his home and add to the respectable front he had assumed. Slipped up with her a mite, by allowin' his hellions to come to the house at night."

"They used to scare her half to death with their rioting down stairs," remarked Kearney Lee.

Hatfield nodded.

"Being respectable, Carnes was able to find out things," he observed in conclusion. "He knew that big money was in the bank payday night. Learned it from Wilkes, who thought he was all right. And I reckon you told him about the cattle buyer comin' to make a dicker for yore beefs, eh, Bruton? Thought so. Those things helped me to tie him up with the Clanton gang, too. The Clanton outfit knew too darn much of what was goin' on. That meant somebody was on the inside and passing out information. Which of course pointed straight to Carnes.

"Well, folks, I reckon that's about all. I see it's a nice, clear night. Figger I'll be ridin'. Captain McDowell will have another little chore waitin' for me, the chances are, by the time I get back to the post. The best of luck to all of yuh, with yore railroad and everything. Adios!"

In his tuft of grass on the hilltop, the annoyed coyote yipped querulously as a great golden horse drifted past on the trail below. His tall rider was lounging gracefully in the saddle, steady green eyes alight with the satisfaction of a difficult chore well done, and with the anticipation of others equally difficult and dangerous promised for the future.

Next Month's Headliners: Further Exploits of the Lone Wolf Ranger in RANGE PIRATES, a thrill-packed complete novel by Jackson Cole — LONG SAM'S PISTOL PREACHMENT, featuring Long Sam Littlejohn, outlawed fighter for justice, by Lee Bond — plus other exciting stories, departments and features by your favorite writers!

"Eat 'im up, Pete!" the kid yelled, and the aged, toothless dog flew at Brill while Weejie, almost helpless, watched from the place where he had fallen

THE KID AND HIS YELLOW DOG

By TEX MUMFORD

When vengeful Brill Mason and Kink Bannock trap old Weejie Crane in back of his bakery, they don't know what's cooking!

IT WAS the nights that old "Weejie" Crane dreaded. You can't see danger slipping up on you in the dark. Ever since Brill Mason and "Kink" Bannock had escaped from the state pen just ahead of their expected hanging, old Weejie feared most of all those night hours he spent in the bake room of his little frontier bakery, getting the dough fixed up for the next day's baking.

It had been Weejie Crane's testimony that had convicted Brill Mason and Kink Bannock of killing Wes Jordon, the marshal of Long Rope. The killers had sworn to get Weejie if they ever had a chance. Now, old Weejie reckoned, they had a right fair chance.

Fear tightened about his heart and made the cold sweat stand out on his bony face, as he walked along Long Rope's dark street.

Gripped in one hand was a sack of meat scraps and sandwiches and in the other the handle of his rusty old sixgun.

All the way he kept a sharp look-out—not only for danger, but for the scarecrow kid and his dog. The meat scraps and sandwiches were for the kid and his dog.

Before he went into the bakery, Weejie glanced hurriedly into the shadowy alley.

The weeds were cut and piled, the tin cans stacked neatly in an old barrel. But he saw nothing of the kid and the dog. He felt let down. And disappointed.

Two things old Weejie Crane liked and had always wanted—kids and dogs. And he had neither. He'd never got around to marrying, and his sister, who kept house for him and bossed him around, figured that dogs and running a bakery didn't mix. But old Weejie still liked kids and dogs, and always would.

He wasn't really old. He just looked that way with his hair mostly gone and his thin shoulders stooped as if he carried a great burden. Which he did . . . this tight fear of sudden and violent death.

"Ain't nothin' to be scared of," Matty, his sister, kept saying in her harsh, too-high voice. "Reckon them two varmints ain't goin' to take time off to look you up."

But Weejie knew better, and he kept the old six-shooter either in his pocket or in the cash drawer under the counter where it would be handy. And all the time he was mixing dough and baking, he kept the back door locked and one eye peeled on the front door.

That is how he happened to see the scarecrow kid and his limping yellow dog. He'd been keeping one eye peeled on the front door. They went past the door late that afternoon three times before they came in.

THE kid pawed his old straw hat off his reddish hair, showing he had had good raisin'. His ragged clothes were twice too big for him, and there was a scared look in his large brown eyes when he looked at old Weejie.

When he spoke, his voice trembled a little.

"Mebbe," he said, "you got some stale bread what nobody would buy that you could give to Pete? His teeth ain't much good for gnawin' on bones no more, and I reckon he's kinda hungry."

Weejie guessed the kid around fourteen or so and small for his size, and he had an idea that the yellow dog was almost as old. Two things Weejie liked. Kids and dogs. Especially when they looked scared and half starved.

"Why, mebbe so," he said, digging under the counter and coming up with a loaf of day-old bread. "Also"—his shrewd eyes were on the kid's thin, freckled face "—got some fresh jelly rolls, just in case you might feel like eatin' a bite."

The kid shook his head.

"Ain't hungry myself," he said with a proud lift of his chin.

The door slammed, and old Weejie's heart leaped into his scrawny throat. He'd been so busy thinking about the kid that he'd plumb forgotten to keep an eye peeled on the door. But his heart slowed and sank into his shoes when he saw old Mrs. Plummer waddling up to the counter.

"A dozen buns," she said tartly, eying the kid and his dog with disapproval.

Weejie reckoned she'd hurry right home and tell Matty about a yellow dog being in the bakery. He straightened his stooped shoulders. Well, let her! This was his bakery.

The woman grabbed the buns and went out with her nose in the air.

"Got some weeds in the back," old Weejie said to the kid. "Reckon you could cut 'em?"

The kid's face lighted up, while his eyes clung to the jelly roll.

"Reckon I could!" he said.

Weejie led the kid through the bake room and into the alley. He didn't forget to take the jelly roll, figuring that the kid would eat it if he earned it. Sure enough, he'd figured right. The kid took the jelly roll when old Weejie offered it to him along with the weed hook.

Weejie hadn't much more than got back into the front room and peeled an eye on the front door when Matty came in. Matty had a skinny and distrustful face, but if you could get next to her, he knew she had a kind heart. Of course, getting next to her was quite a problem.

Matty's sharp eyes flashed around the room.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Who?" Weejie asked innocently.

"That boy and the yellow dog?"

"Oh—them." Weejie got busy with the feather duster. "Hired the kid to chop down some weeds. Figured them weeds in the alley was about ready to seed an—"

"Hump!" Matty said, and swished into the bake room.

She was back in a minute. "Who is he?"

Old Weejie shook his bald head. "No idea." His eyes were on the door. Outside three horsemen cantered along the street, raising a thin web of hot dust. He recognized them as Crooked S riders and breathed a sigh of relief.

Matty's eyes narrowed. "Still worryin',"

she said. "Why don't you forget them varmints?"

Forget 'em? Old Weejie's mouth felt dry. He reckoned when those two came for him, they'd come riding hard in a swirl of dust unless they slipped up in the dark.

"I ain't worryin'," he said.

Matty pointed a long, skinny finger at him. "Don't you dare bring that boy and his dog to the house to stay all night. Not even to sleep in the barn. Looks like a common tramp to me. And keep that dog out of the bakery. People don't want dog smell in their baked goods. And forget about them two men!"

She turned with a swish of skirts and stamped out. He could hear her heels clicking away on the board walk. He grinned feebly. Matty wasn't as bad as her bark sounded, but he reckoned he wouldn't take the kid to the house with him.

The kid and his dog came in through the bake room door.

"Weeds all cut," the kid announced.

WEEJIE pulled out another jelly roll. "That first was just part pay," he said. "Here's the rest."

The kid shook his red head. "Reckon I'll clean up them cans in the back first."

Weejie liked kids. Especially this kid with the proud lift to his chin.

"What's your name, young feller, and where're you from?" he asked.

"Mike Connor," the kid answered. "Lived on a homestead with my Mom way down in Cass County. She died. Nothin' for me to do, so joined up with a wagon-train. But they wouldn't let Pete ride. His feet got sore, and he couldn't keep up. So I left one night."

"You think a heap of that dog."

The kid nodded. "Had him ever since I can remember."

Weejie patted the dog's shaggy head. Dogs liked him. This one wagged his tail and muzzled his thin hand.

"He don't make up with everyone," the kid said. He shuffled his feet on the pine floor, grinned. "He don't look like much any more, but in his day, he was a scrapper. Ain't hardly got any teeth left now."

The wind rattled the door, and old Weejie jumped. Again he had forgotten to keep an eye on the door. His throat tightened.

"What's the matter, mister?" the kid asked. "Scared of somethin'?"

"No," Weejie said.

"Thought mebbe if you was, I could help yuh."

Weejie managed a grin. "Run along an' pick up them cans."

"You've been mighty good to Pete an' me, and—"

"Don't forget your jelly roll," Weejie interrupted him.

The kid went out with the old dog limping right at his heels.

Weejie locked up and went to supper after that, not forgetting to slip the old six-gun into his pocket. Not that he figured he could outshoot Brill and Kink. He just felt some better with the weight of the gun pulling at his pocket.

Matty could cook, but old Weejie hadn't any appetite. It's hard for a man to eat with a great fear in his heart. Also, he kept thinking about the red-headed kid and wondering where he and the old sore footed dog would sleep that night.

Matty shoved back her chair and stood up. "Sack of old meat scraps on the kitchen table," she said tartly. "Also, some ham sandwitches. The idea of stuffin' a growin' boy with jelly rolls!"

Old Weejie spilled some coffee. He tried not to look too pleased, but failed.

Matty pointed a skinny finger at him. "Don't go gettin' any ideas," she said. "I won't have that boy and his dog in the house! Understand?"

He understood.

And now he had food for the kid and the old dog, but they had disappeared. He sighed and let himself into the bakery. He reckoned the kid might have trouble keeping warm before morning.

Weejie locked himself in the bakery at nights. Felt safer with the doors locked and the shades pulled down. He left the food on the front counter and started back to the bake room. Wind sighed around the building, making him shiver. He reached the bake room door and shoved it open.

The bake room was as dark as the inside of an old stove. He pawed out a match and struck it on the seat of his pants. The match flared, and he held it with unsteady hands to the lamp wick. Anyway, darkness scared him.

He felt better when the light chased the shadows back tight against the walls. Felt better until he saw that the splintered back door hung open on sprung hinges. Then

his knees got weak, while the sweat ran down his bony face.

A man stepped out from behind a stack of empty flour barrels. A tall man with a gun in his hand. He was Brill Mason.

Kink Bannock followed, walking with a twisted limp. He had two guns strapped low against his skinny hips. People said he could shoot equally well with either hand, that he was running Billy the Kid a close race in chalking up killings.

BRILL MASON did the talking. His voice didn't match his looks. It was soft, almost like a woman's, but his face looked rock-hard.

"Reckon you thought we was foolin' when we said we'd get you someday?" he said.

Old Weejie tried to swallow and got choked. He thought of the gun in his coat pocket and realized he'd never get a chance to use it.

He even thought back to that night a year ago when he'd started home after finishing up his mixing. It was late. He'd come into the street just in time to see two men lift their guns and pour lead into old Wes Jordon, the marshal. Then they ran through a square of light that splashed out from Ed Weaver's saloon, and Weejie had seen their faces. You couldn't forget faces like Brill and Kink had.

"We said we'd come back fer you," Brill went on in his high, soft voice. "And here we are! If you've got any last words, spit 'em out!"

"Cut the talk, Brill," Kink said sharply. "Let's get the job done." He drew one of his guns.

A shadow moved in the doorway, and Weejie lifted his terrified eyes. The red-headed kid stood there, his face white.

Old Weejie forgot his own danger, thinking that the men would kill the kid, too. He tried to get some words up past the choke in his throat. It didn't work.

Then he saw the kid's lips move.

"Get 'em, Pete!" he heard the kid say. And the old yellow dog bounded into the light and leaped at Brill Mason's throat.

Brill didn't have much trouble shaking the old toothless dog off. Pete rolled across the floor, and Kink's gun exploded. The dog let out a yip and slammed against the wall. But he came right back at Brill. This time blood splashed on Brill's shirt front. But it was Pete's blood, not Brill's.

"Eat 'im up, Pete!" the kid yelled.

Right on top of the yell, old Weejie thumbed the hammer of his rusty six-gun. He saw Kink Bannock twist up and fall into a lifeless heap. Then Brill's heavy boot caught Pete in the ribs and sent him yelping and snarling across the floor.

Brill's gun spat flame, and old Weejie felt himself bang against the work table. Bread pans crashed about his feet. He couldn't feel his left arm and looked down at it. Blood ran off the ends of his fingers. Funny, no pain. Then he saw Brill's gun lift.

A yellow streak of fury leaped across the room, and Brill's shot went wild. Cursing madly, he turned his gun on the dog, and old Weejie felt his own six buck in his one good hand.

Brill went down beside his partner and lay still. The old yellow dog, growling deeply, dragged himself across the floor and collapsed across Brill's big legs.

Then something happened to Weejie's knees. They wouldn't hold him up. Darkness swept over him as he fell.

* * * * *

When Weejie opened his eyes, the bake room swam with people, and old Doc Slocum's face floated over him.

"He's comin' out of it," he heard Doc's voice say, as if from a vast distance. "Reckon he'll be up and punchin' bread dough before the week's over."

Weejie tried to sit erect and found that he could, even if the room did whirl.

"Don't mind me, Doc," he panted. "You go take a look at that yaller dog."

Doc Slocum grinned. "Don't worry about the dog. Reckon he couldn't have any better care than he's gettin'."

Then Weejie heard Matty's harsh, too high voice.

"Got to take him home where I can look after him and feed him up," she said. "And you, too," she said to the kid. "Bakeries ain't no place for dogs. They need a home same as everybody."

Weejie got his eyes in focus. Matty was down on her knees, working at the bloody crease Brill's bullet had clipped in Pete's mangy hide.

Pete liked it. He even kind of grinned in a toothless way at Weejie while his bushy tail thumped loudly against a bread pan.

Weejie grinned back. He liked kids and dogs. Always had wanted one of each. Now, he reckoned, he had one of each.

Shake, Pardner!

By BILL ANSON

This is the year of the Texas Centennial—commemorating a glorious century of friendship, achievement and progress!

THIS year America finds a new saying. It will be on every tongue for ages to come. Independence Day marks the hour of its national acceptance as sure-fire currency. This saying has now been tested in the crucibles of our country's magnificent history for one hundred full years and it has not been found wanting.

Stephen F. Austin

The expression is—*As firm as a Texan handshake!*

It means everything that is good and solid, trustworthy and pure in spirit, loyal and true—everything that Texas means and has proved!

The extended hand has always been the symbol of Texas, who derived her name from the Indian word *tejas*, meaning "friend." It was on July 4, 1845, that the Republic of Texas offered her hand as a partner to the other States of the Nation. The alliance was sealed in a hearty grip one hundred years ago last February 19, when the Lone Star Flag was lowered over the first Capitol in Austin, and the Star Spangled Banner was run up the masthead.

A New Star for Old Glory

But Texans had to wait until July 4, 1846, to see their star—the twenty-sixth—appear in the blue field of Old Glory. That was one hundred years ago this Fourth of July! One hundred years for the Nation to test the firmness of a Texan's grip!

"Welcome, stranger!"

Texas has greeted twenty-two other stars to *her* national flag, with the same devotion that her great leaders welcomed men who rallied to her aid. What visions of the past come to mind—

Stephen F. Austin standing on the bank of the *Rio de los Brazos de Dios* (River of the Arms of God), his hand extended to a new member of the Austin colony in 1823 at San Felipe de Austin.

Sam Houston greeting recruits to his band in 1836, with the stirring words: "Remember the Alamo!"

William Barret Travis, David Crockett, and James Bowie clasping hands in the wilderness and drinking a toast: "Liberty and Texas!"

Anson Jones, last president of the Republic, greeting James P. Henderson, the first governor of the State of Texas, to the cheers of a crowd dressed in all manner of clothes—stovepipe hats, sombreros, head dresses, braids, and the gray thatches of the old slaves.

Texas Stands for Freedom

Sam Houston

Texas was always colorful, always the land of promise, always the land of freedom and prosperity—always the green pasture where the heart beat just a little prouder.

It was the lowly puncher in his weather-stained sombrero, patched shirt, brush-scratched chaps, and six-gun belted to his hip who tore this land from the grip of the wilderness and built it step by step and shot by shot into the best darned place in the whole world. Cattle made Texas wealthy, but the man who rode at point and with the drags gave the Lone Star State her courage.

Names of famous grangers come to mind quickly—Maverick, Goodnight, Loving, Chisum, and King. From the ragged, wild-eyed longhorn that could fatten up on sand burs and gravel and that slept with its feet in an oven and its head in a refrigerator, these

TEXAS JOINS THE UNION

Lowering of the Lone Star Flag

This diorama, constructed from early sketches, is on exhibition at the Texas Memorial Museum. It represents the ceremony which took place on the afternoon of February 19, 1846, on the site of the first Capitol in Austin.

men developed the famous Texas shorthorn and the Brahman steer that carry their ponderous "blue" weight on satin hoofs. But could the rancher have done as much for the Lone Star State if it had not been for the greatest man of them all—the Texas Ranger!

The history of Texas is the history of the Ranger. Not three years after Stephen F. Austin's first colony came into being in 1823 on the bank of the *Rio de los Brazos de Dios*, he called together the representatives of the various militia districts to adopt a plan to guard against Indian attacks.

Rangers Are Organized

This meeting resulted in an arrangement to keep from twenty to thirty mounted Rangers in service. It makes no difference whether these riders were ever called into action or not, but this was the first evidence of the formation of a famous corps of fighting men.

The Indian fought from the back of a horse, and the first Ranger had to adopt this then novel means to fight back. And thus it can be said that the Lone Star State grew up in a saddle.

"A Texas Ranger can ride like a Mexican, trail like an Indian, shoot like a Tennesseean, and fight like the very devil!" wrote John S. Ford, editor and Texas Ranger back in 1846.

Captain Hays Takes Charge

In but a short span of six years as an authentic corps of State Police, such things were being written about the Texas Rangers. History gives Captain John Coffee Hays of Tennessee the honor of being the first real leader of the Corps when, in 1840, his troop started scouring the Border for marauding Indians and pillaging Mexicans.

In that year Texas had the man big enough for the job, and she had the horse for him to ride. But one item was lacking—the six-gun.

Young Samuel Colt was the inventor, and the hard-pressed Rangers of the Lone Star State were first to adopt it, with the result that Colt's first practical weapon became known as the *Texas*—a .34 caliber, six-

chambered revolver.

The *Texas* was a light weapon without a trigger guard. It had to be dismantled into three pieces while being loaded. So Captain Samuel H. Walker of the Rangers journeyed all the way to New York to talk with Sam Colt.

"There's a big job ahead of us, pardner," Sam Walker probably said to young Sam Colt. "You've got to give us more weight in that there shooting-iron. We want to use it as a club when its empty. We want to be able to load it from the back of a galloping bronc."

Colt Pistol Makes History

By 1842 Sam Colt was manufacturing the greatest weapon in the history of firearms, the *Walker Colt*—a .44 caliber six-shooter with an attached lever for ramming the bullets into the chambers of the cylinders. By 1844 history had been made through the use of this weapon in the battle of the Pedernales, when Captain Hays and fourteen of his men rode out from San Antonio looking for Indians. They found them, all right, while returning home—about seventy Comanches.

Some of the Rangers were killed, but more than thirty Indians bit the dust. Captain Hays modestly attributed victory to the perfect shooting of his Rangers and the total surprise of the Indians, who had never seen or heard of the new six-shooter.

Mrs. Mary A. Maverick, a great Texas lady, tells us in her memoirs, that Sam Walker was run through the body by a spear in this yowling, thundering fracas, but he fought right on through the battle—like a true Texan!

First it was Indian trouble, and in the wars the Rangers won their spurs. Texas could not develop as a State until ranchers were able to drive westward and up into the Panhandle. By 1875, the redskin was on the run. A year later barbed wire was successfully introduced. Then the call for the tall horsebacker carrying the star-in-the-circle insignia over his heart came from far and near. It was the start of the Fence-cutting War.

Badmen Cut Their Notches

Guns were being notched all over the Lone Star State, and such notorious characters as Wesley Hardin and Sam Bass sprouted in the tall grass. Texas was growing up like a big awkward frontier boy who needed plenty of "whuppin'" to correct his mistakes. Sight of a Texas Ranger trotting into an outpost brought cheer to the hearts of nester and waddy, for there came their true friend—the man with a grip of steel.

"Shake, pardner!"

Ranger Captain L. H. McNelly had such a greeting when his company rode into the quiet, little town of Oakville, which the outlaw knights of the brush made their headquarters after raids and holdups. It didn't take McNelly long to clean up this hotbed of lawlessness, where shootings occurred every night and sheriffs were hanged from the low limbs of the shade oaks during the Fence-cutting War.

Fighting Parson Has Ways

There were some men along the Texas frontier who needed religion, and they found a man to give it to them—Andrew Jackson Potter, "the fightin' parson." He often preached in the only available building in town, the saloon, in front of which he would stand a man to call out:

"Oyez, oyez, there's goin' to be some thunderin' racket here this mornin' gents, by Fightin' Parson Potter, a reformed gambler, gents, but now a shore-nuff gospel shark. It's agoin' to begin in fifteen minutes, gents. All old whiskey soaks an' card sharpers better come on over and learn to mend yer ways or the devil's gonna git ye quicker'n brimstone kin scorch a feather."

Maybe some of the educated Texans turned up their noses at Parson Potter's methods, but he did good work. And lest anybody think that the cowboy treated religion with any levity, we might quote a beautiful verse from The Cowboy's Dream—

> The trail to green pastures, though narrow,
> Leads straight to the home in the sky.
> To the headquarters ranch of the Father
> In the land of the sweet by and by.

It took all kinds to make Texas friendship what it is now. In early days, one man had to help another, and they learned to live together in fellowship, no matter what the difference of their social station. One of the best tales—perhaps stretched a mite—ever told is about one Texan going so far as to force a stranger to visit him at the point of a gun.

It's the Texan's ability to laugh at hardship that thaws the heart of the visitor so quickly, and keeps that heart warm with

such entertaining as the one about the two punchers that got fired. It's a Lone Star classic that you can hear being told as far north as the Canadian Border. How the waddies were sent out to build a fence and they stumbled upon a den of between five and ten thousand rattlesnakes—

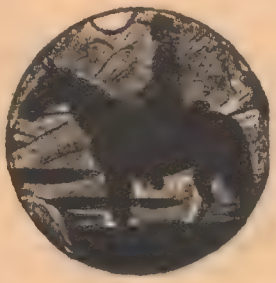
Crawlin' Fence Posts!

Well, those snakes had been frozen stiff by a norther. So the punchers threw a rope about the bundle and began using the reptiles for fence posts. Finishing the work in short order, they earned the commendation of their boss. But when the sun began to shine, the snakes thawed out and carried off two miles of good barbed wire fence! And that's how come the two punchers got fired.

Yes, Texas has just about everything the heart desires—from tall stories to orange blossoms. And the native son takes after the land. He is remarkable for his salubrious nature, but he also can boil up to over one hundred degrees in temperature and drop down to fifteen degrees below zero in a matter of seconds—when prodded! His heart is big enough to contain all New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois.

And for a hundred years America has never found the Texan wanting in virtue. He has passed the test. And this July the Fourth a new saying comes to the tongue throughout these United States, to remain forever—

As firm as a Texan handshake!



Highlights of Texas History

TEXAS soil claims the great honor of being the second region in the United States to be visited by Europeans. Six years after Ponce de Leon had discovered Florida in 1513, Alonso Alvarez de Pineda in 1519 sailed into the mouth of the Rio Grande River—Rio Grande de las Palmas—while searching for a direct western route to India and Cathay.

* * * * *

Emigration of United States citizens to Texas started in 1821 when Stephen F. Austin called for three hundred families of character "perfectly unblemished . . . moral . . . industrious . . . and absolutely free of the vice of intoxication." San Felipe de Austin was founded in 1823 on the banks of the Brazos—Rio de los Brazos de Dios, River of the Arms of God.

* * * * *

marks the courageous town of Washington on the Lone Star map, where a fearless band of colonists met in March, 1836, to declare their independence of Mexico and frame a constitution —which inspiration the soldiers of Sam Houston carried in their hearts in April of the same year when they defeated General Santa Anna in the battle of San Jacinto and won their freedom for all time.

* * * * *

Annexation of Texas by the government of the United States of America was approved at a convention of Lone Star leaders in Austin on Independence Day, 1845, and fighting Texans started joining the colors to fight Mexico once more, this time under U.S. General Zachary Taylor. Texas won all the territory east of the Rio Grande for her own.

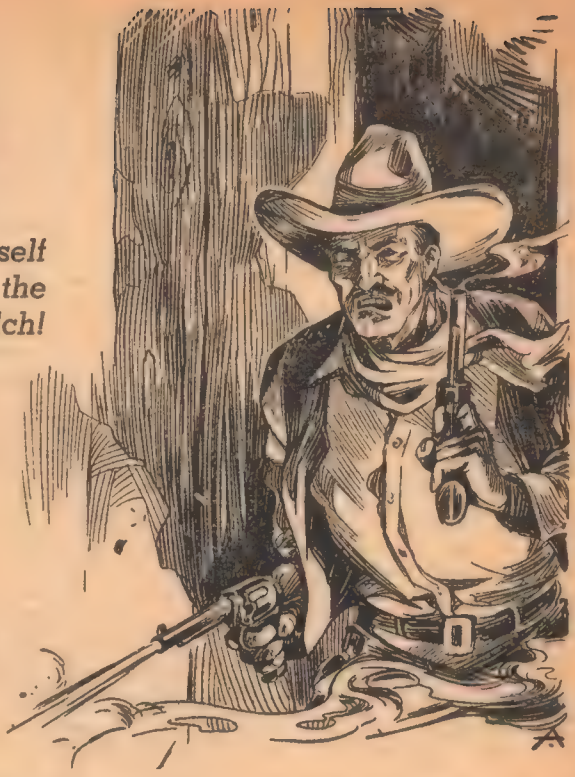
* * * * *

Statehood of Texas passes the one-hundred-year mark this year of 1946—which brings back from the Global War to her native soil the fighting descendants of fighting men who made the Lone Star State a land of promise and plenty and the best darned place in all the world to live!

SALTY STRANGER

By SAM BRANT

Sudden Sampson defends himself against a murder charge in the lawless town of Rocky Gulch!



ROCKY GULCH was a town as hard as its name. The citizens were tough and proud of it. It was a place where no questions were asked, and no answers given the curious. Nestling at the edge of the badlands, the town was right handy for owlhoots, and lots of them drifted into Rocky Gulch to stay awhile.

For that reason, no one in the town paid much mind to the big man on the rangy sorrel who rode into Rocky Gulch one morning. The stranger was dressed in worn and dusty range clothes, and he wore two guns in holsters tied low on his thighs. He had a hard face in which was set a small, black mustache, and in all respects appeared a right salty hombre.

He halted his horse in front of the livery stable and swung out of the saddle. Old Dan Dover, who owned the stable, was sitting on a bench in front of the place. The old man had an even disposition—it was all mean.

"Feed and water my hoss, and give him a rub down," ordered the stranger.

"Do it yoreself," snapped Dover. "I ain't takin' care of the hosses of every Tom, John, and Henry that shows up around here."

"Yuh made three wrong guesses," said the stranger. "My name ain't Tom, nor is it John, nor Henry. It's Sudden Sampson."

"Who cares?" Dover yawned and leaned back on the bench. "I never heard of yuh, and it wouldn't matter if I had. I don't take care of any hosses this early in the mornin'."

"All right," Sampson said mildly. "I'll do it myself."

He led the sorrel into the stable through the big door that was standing open. Then he unsaddled the horse and gave him a good rubdown. He found a pail of water, let the animal drink, and then turned it into an empty stall where there was feed in the manger.

Sampson hung his gear on a pole and stepped out of the stable. There was a big, heavy-set man in a black suit and black string tie standing near the bench talking to Dover. The stable keeper glanced at Sampson and frowned.

"That'll be five dollars a day, in advance, for feedin' and boardin' yore hoss," Dover said.

"Five dollars a day!" snapped Sampson. "Yuh're prices are kinda high, aren't they? Most stables don't charge more than a dollar or so a day."

"That's the trouble with these saddle tramps who come ridin' into this town," said Dover to the big man beside him. "They got big ideas and no money to back them up. Ain't that so, Garford?"

"It is." Garford glared at Sampson. "Pay up or get out, stranger."

"How did you get in this?" Sampson's eyes were hard as he stared at Garford. "Seems to me that I was talkin' to this cross-grained, old curmudgeon who calls himself a livery

stable keeper."

"Did yuh hear what he said?" Dover leaped to his feet. "If it means what I think it means, then I been insulted."

"There's no doubt of it," growled Garford. "And I won't stand for anybody pickin' on yuh like that, Dan."

HE LUNGED forward and took a wild swing at Sampson. He missed as Sampson ducked. Then Sampson lashed out with both fists. One blow landed on Garford's chin, the other on his chest just over the heart, and Garford reeled back.

Sampson hit Garford again before the big man could recover, and knocked him down. Garford dropped to the street and sprawled there in the dust. Men appeared from buildings along the street, attracted by the fight, and they hurried to the livery stable.

Dover reached down beside the bench and picked up an old horseshoe that was lying there.

"It wasn't a fair fight," Dover shouted. "The stranger hit Garford with this horseshoe and knocked him out."

"Why, you liar!" snapped Sampson. "Yuh know I didn't do any such thing."

A crowd quickly gathered. Sampson found himself surrounded by silent men, with hostile expressions on their faces. He moved so that his back was against the wall of the stable and his hands were close to the guns in his holsters.

Garford recovered and got slowly to his feet. Dover was still shouting, claiming that Sampson had used the horseshoe to knock the other man out. Garford scowled and shoved his way through the crowd until he reached the spot where Sampson and the stable keeper were standing.

"Shut up, Dover," Garford said, and the old man stopped yelling. "Yuh know that this man knocked me out with his fists in a fair fight. He didn't use any horseshoe—so stop lyin' about it."

"Aw, I was just tryin' to help yuh," protested Dover. "Didn't seem right that this—this Sudden Sampson feller could knock yuh out so easy, Matt."

Sampson found himself puzzled as he stood there. That Matt Garford should come to his defense and say that Dover was lying about the horseshoe being used in the fight, struck him as mighty strange. For all his aggressive attitude, Garford seemed a right honest hombre.

"Sudden Sampson!" exclaimed a rangy, red-headed waddy, a note of awe in his voice as he stared at Sampson. "I've heard of that gent and I shore wouldn't want to tangle with him. Heard he was plumb poison!"

"He is?" Dover looked nervously at Sampson. "Reckon I made a mistake, Mr. Sampson. The charge for boardin' yore hoss will be a dollar a day."

"Thanks," said Sampson dryly.

The crowd gradually drifted away. Since it did not look like the fight would continue, they were no longer interested. Garford grinned at Sampson and then strolled down the street without looking back.

Sampson stepped out from the wall of the building. He looked hard at Dover and the stable keeper murmured something under his breath and hurried into the big barn. The red-headed waddy was standing alone, looking at Sampson.

"Jerry Grant is the name," said the waddy, and then he grinned. "Reckon yuh'll admit that I shore buttered yuh up."

"You did." Sampson nodded. "Where did yuh hear of Sudden Sampson before, Grant?"

"I never did," said Grant softly. "But it looked like a good time to make out like I had. They like folks tough in this town, so yuh better live up to yore reputation, Sampson."

"I aim to do that," Sampson said. "I heard that Rocky Gulch has been gettin' a little too tough. That a couple of lawmen have been killed here durin' the last few months."

"That's right," said Grant somberly. "There's been talk of a U. S. Marshal showin' up here and cleanin' up the town. I ain't got the right of all of it yet. I'm a stranger in town myself—just drifted in a few days ago."

"Who's the boss of the town?" Sampson asked.

"Why, Matt Garford," said Grant. "Didn't yuh know that?"

"No." Sampson shook his head. "I just hit town myself a little while ago. Dover refused to take care of my hoss, and then wanted to charge me five dollars a day to board him."

"Dover is mean," said Grant. "And dangerous. He's likely to try to pull some dirty trick on yuh. He didn't like the way he had to back down in front of the crowd—I'm plumb shore of that."

"How about Garford?" Sampson asked. "There's a gent I can't figger. He starts a fight with me and then, when I knock him

out, he's nice about it. He could have sided Dover about my havin' used that horseshoe."

"No, he couldn't," said Grant. "Some of us seen the fight from across the street at the time it started. We knew yuh didn't use that horseshoe. We saw Dover pick it up from beside the bench. Garford is smart; he must have figgered somethin' like that happened, so he sides yuh to make himself look good."

"So that's it," said Sampson. "Looks like I better watch out for Garford, after all."

"It wouldn't hurt none," said Grant, as he turned away. "See yuh around town."

SAMPSON found himself alone as the red-headed waddy walked away. The town was quiet, and it looked peaceful enough, but somehow Sampson didn't feel safe. He got the impression that men were watching him all up and down the street, waiting for the next move he would make.

"Yore hoss is actin' strange," announced Dover, as he appeared in the doorway of the stable. "Better take a look at him, Sampson. He's actin' sick."

Sampson followed Dover into the barn. It was dark in there and Sampson found it hard to see after having been so long in the bright morning sunlight. The stable keeper led the way toward the stalls. Sampson heard a slight noise behind him and tried to turn, but he was not quite quick enough. He got a vague glimpse of a shadowy form, and then something hit him a hard blow on the head and everything went black as he dropped unconscious to the stable floor.

It must have been a long time after that when he again opened his eyes. His head was one, dull, throbbing ache, and he appeared to be lying on a bunk in a small room.

Sampson sat up. He found he was still wearing his guns, and his Stetson was lying on the floor beside the bunk. He picked up the hat and gingerly put it on, careful not to jar his aching head too much. There was no one else in the room. He checked his guns and found them still fully loaded.

"Now why knock me out and bring me here?" he wondered. "And who hit me when I was in the livery stable. Wasn't Dover, 'cause he was walkin' ahead of me."

He discovered he was in a small shack situated at the north end of the town, evidently where one of the citizens of Rocky Gulch lived. Sampson walked out onto the street and glanced up. From the position of the sun, he figured it was late afternoon.

There was a crowd of men gathered in front of the livery stable. He saw the men milling around and wondered what was wrong. He drifted down the street toward the stable. As he approached, one of the men saw him and let out a shout.

"There he is!" the man yelled. "There's the sneakin' killer."

Sampson did not halt as he heard the words. He continued to advance toward the crowd, his hands swinging close to the butts of the guns in his holsters. The throng grew silent as he approached. Everyone was watching him. He saw Garford and Grant standing with the other men.

"What's the matter?" demanded Sampson, as he drew closer. "Why are yuh callin' me a killer?"

"I didn't think yuh'd do such a thing, Sampson," Garford said. "Killin' Dan Dover like yuh done."

"Killin' Dover!" exclaimed Sampson in amazement. "What are yuh talkin' about, Garford?"

"No use denyin' it, Sampson," said Garford coldly. "Dover named yuh as his killer before he died."

"Prove it!" snapped Sampson.

"In here," said Garford, leading the way into the barn.

Sampson followed him, and Grant and some of the other men trailed after them. The old stable owner was lying face downward on the floor. One arm lay outstretched, his fingers pointing to bright red letters scrawled on the board floor. The letters read:

Sampson killed me

"Dover wrote that with his own blood as he was dyin'," Garford said. "He's been robbed, too. Reckon that's why yuh killed him, Sampson."

"How long has he been dead?" Sampson asked.

"Don't know." Garford frowned. "Maybe a couple of hours. Hard to say. Since we have no sheriff in this town, I'm actin' for the Law."

It was then that the men in the stable learned where Sampson got his nickname "Sudden." He leaped to one side, then whirled, and as he turned, his guns were in his hands.

"Somebody framed me," he snapped. "How was Dover killed?"

"Shot in the back, and the bullet must have struck his heart," said Garford, glaring at the guns in Sampson's hands. "Yuh're shore actin' like a guilty man, Sampson."

"And when he was dying, Dover had time to write my name on the floor with red paint?" demanded Sampson.

"Red paint?" said Garford. "What are yuh talkin' about? He wrote that message in blood."

"No he didn't," said Sampson. "Blood dries a lot darker color than that."

"He's right, come to think of it," said Jerry Grant.

THE red-headed waddy looked around, then stepped over to one corner and lifted up a burlap sack. "And here's a can of red paint!" he exclaimed. "Looks like somebody did try to frame yuh all right, Sampson."

"So they did," Sampson said. "And I know who it was—the man who must have figgered that I was the U. S. Marshal bein' sent to clean up this town. Matt Garford!"

"Get him, men!" shouted Garford. "I figgered he was a lawman workin' under cover."

Sampson saw hands flashing to holsters all around him, and then his own guns were roaring. Garford went down in the first blast, and another man dropped as a bullet got him. A third man aimed his Colt at Sampson—but the red-headed Grant's gun roared, and the man dropped before he could pull the trigger.

"I've had enough!" cried one of Garford's men, dropping his gun and extending his hands high above his head. "I told Garford he was makin' a mistake in killin' them lawmen."

"That's right," said another man, as he also surrendered. "Killin' lawmen gives a town a bad name."

"Had to kill Dover," murmured Garford, from the floor. "Old man was gettin' foolish—tryin' to make out like Sampson hit me with—horseshoe. Should have known better than act suspicious—couldn't trust him. Not with lawman around—he—"

Garford shuddered and grew still.

"Thanks, Sampson," said Grant. "Yuh shore saved me a lot of work by showin' up in Rocky Gulch."

"Meanin' what?" asked Sampson in surprise.

"That I happen to be the U. S. Deputy Marshal who was sent here to clean up this town," said Grant, producing a badge and placing it on his shirt. "Was sizin' things up when yuh got here."

"If yuh're the marshal, then who is Sudden Sampson?" demanded one of Garford's gun hands.

"I happen to be the son of the last county sheriff who was killed in this town," said Sampson. "And it looks like I got the hombre who killed my dad."

"It shore enough does," Grant agreed, looking down to where Garford lay dead on the floor.

"You take charge, Marshal," Sampson said then, as he moved toward the stalls. "Want to look over my hoss to see he's not really sick like Dover said he was. Boardin' that hoss shore was expensive—for Dover!"

Next Month: LONG SAM'S PISTOL PREACHMENT, by LEE BOND

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

Cy Barz let out a blood-curdling screech and his gun leaped out of his hand

DOC SWAP'S LUCKY HORSESHOE

By BEN FRANK

The tradin' hombre trades himself into a magic box, a hairy wildman and—a showdown with Sheriff MacLoyd!

OLD DOC SWAP waddled along the darkening street of Dry Bluffs, whistling "Little Brown Jug" between his teeth. A smell of evening cooking hung in the still, warm air. Doc's stubby nose wrinkled up in high appreciation. Tonight he was as happy as a kid with a pocket full of jellybeans for, he reckoned, in a couple of minutes he'd work out one of the slickest three-cornered deals he'd ever engineered. The long, lanky figure of Sheriff MacLoyd approached, and Doc stopped his whistling.

It was never good policy to appear too happy around his old crony and deadly rival in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—fiddle playin' and swappin'. MacLoyd had an uncanny nose for smelling an unfinished deal a mile away and, worse than that, he had a disquieting habit of horning

in on the deal.

MacLoyd carried a long slender object over one shoulder. An object that might be a fence post, a rake handle, or a gun—it was too dark for Doc to tell.

The bean-pole sheriff stopped, shifted his cud and spat in an explosive way.

"Fine ev'nin' fer walkin'," he greeted.

Doc stiffened. That voice seemed to have a ring of triumph. He had a feeling that the sheriff was grinning down at him.

"Mebbe so," he answered cautiously. "Mebbe not."

"Got to be goin'," MacLoyd said. "Bein' sheriff keeps a feller on the move. Ain't like bein' a jasper who chases around, tradin' fer junk."

Doc felt a flare of anger burn up into his whiskery face at this slur upon his occupation.

"Now, listen here, yuh hungry lookin' ole—" he began.

"S'long, Doc."

MacLoyd chuckled deeply and legged it on up the street.

Doc was still riled and not a little worried when he arrived at Wes Shotwell's place. Wes, his bald head shining in the lamplight, stood in the doorway. He didn't look Doc in the eyes.

"Everything's all fixed," Doc said, even if he did feel that something had misfired with his carefully laid plans. "Jake Yost said he'd give yuh fifty dollars for my red colt."

Wes rubbed his bald head. He still didn't meet Doc's eye.

Doc suddenly had a sinking sensation hit him in the abdomen. For a long time the old swapper had been wanting Wes Shotwell's old Pennsylvania rifle to hang over the natural rock fireplace in his neat white house at the edge of town. But Wes had stubbornly refused to trade off the gun. He wanted fifty dollars cash for it.

NOW, Doc Swap wasn't a buyer. He was a trader. He would rather stop eating or playing the fiddle than pay Wes fifty dollars cash for the rifle. That was why he'd engineered the three-cornered deal—getting Jake Yost's promise to pay fifty dollars to Wes for the red colt, which Doc intended to trade Wes for the rifle. In this way, Wes would get the cash money without Doc handing it over, and Doc would get the rifle.

Everyone would be happy.

But now, Doc had a feeling that things had gone haywire.

Wes shoved his big hands into his pockets.

"Doc, I ain't got that rifle no more."

"But yuh said if—"

"I know." Wes scowled at his feet. "But just a few minutes ago, Sheriff MacLoyd come along. I got to tellin' him how I was goin' to get that colt of yours and sell it fer fifty bucks. And what do you think?"

Doc's fat knees felt a little weak.

"Old MacLoyd offered me sixty-five," Wes went on. "You see how it was, Doc!"

"Dad-blast it, Wes!" Doc sputtered. "After I got yore word!"

"Reckon I shouldn't have done it," Wes sighed. His hand came out of a pocket with a glittering object. A pint-sized horseshoe. "Look, Doc," he said, his voice lifting. "A lucky horseshoe what a Indian over at Junction sold me. After me lettin' MacLoyd have that gun, I feel like I ought to do somethin' fer you, Doc. You take this horseshoe fer luck."

Doc, never one to turn anything down which might add to his collection of "swappin' " goods, took the horseshoe.

"No hard feelin's, Doc?" Wes asked anxiously.

"Nope," Doc answered truthfully.

At least, he felt no rancor toward Wes. After all, sixty-five dollars was sixty-five dollars. But as for Sheriff MacLoyd—

Doc angrily jammed his fancy Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered it a highlight in his swapping career—clear down to his ears.

So old MacLoyd had horned in on another deal! Cussing hoarsely into his ragged whiskers, old Doc plowed back through the darkness toward the jail. He'd tell MacLoyd a thing or two. And now that the sheriff had the rifle, Doc wanted it worse than before. For forty years he and the sheriff had been trying to out-swap each other.

The feud was a bitter one.

MacLoyd wasn't in his two-by-four office. Ham Brady, a deputy, sat slouched in the old swivel-chair, cleaning his horny fingernails with a small, shiny pocket knife.

Ham trapped in winter and loafed in summer and was never known to go anyplace without his squirrel skin cap. He pawed the tail of his cap out of his eyes and looked up at Doc. There was a bewildered expression on his weatherbeaten face.

"Where's that hoss-thievin' sheriff?" Doc demanded.

Ham shook his head, the squirrel tail sliding into his eyes again.

"Ain't got no idea." He pointed a trembling finger at a large rag doll perched on the battered oak desk. "Doc," he went on hoarsely, "I'd give a purty to know just where I got that doll. I was over to Junction last night, met a feller I knowed, and had a drink or two with him. That's the last I remember. When I woke up this mornin', here I was with that doll in my arms."

The rag doll smilled unconcernedly at Doc. It kind of took the old swapper's fancy. His fat fist came out of his coat pocket with the half-pint horseshoe.

"Here's what yuh need, Ham," he said cheerfully. "This is likely the most potent luck charm west of the Mississippi. Besides bein' a memory jogger."

Ham's bleary eyes lighted. In no time at all, Doc had swapped the horseshoe for the rag doll and the knife "to-boot." The knife was a trick affair. When you pushed a button, the blade flew open. Doc had always wanted a knife like that.

Outside, a dryness struck his gullet, so the oldster headed across the street for the Palace Saloon. He reckoned that the Palace wasn't exactly the place to take a lady, so he left the rag doll on an up-ended rain barrel at the side of the saloon.

SHOVING his fancy Stetson back on his gleaming bald head, he sidled up to the bar.

"Goop" Gibson, the barkeep gave him a beefy grin.

"The usual, Doc?" he asked.

Doc nodded and Goop came up with a bottle of strawberry pop. Doc didn't bother about paying for the pop as he still had credit at the Palace due to a swap he'd made with Goop a few days before.

He faced about and let his eyes wander over the room.

The barber, Pully, he saw, was drinking something tonight besides his own hair tonic. Jed Williams, Dry Bluff's money bags, carefully sipped a small glass of beer. Deacon Plumb, the county commissioner, snored gently in a chair back of the pot-bellied stove. And Sheriff MacLoyd sat at a table, playing solitare!

Forgetting his strawberry pop, Doc made a bee-line for his old rival.

MacLoyd glanced up, grinned, uncrossed his bowed, bony legs, puckered and dead-centered a battered brass spittoon halfway across the room.

"Got a fine Pennsylvania rifle, Doc," he said without preliminary. "Made around seventeen sixty. Mighty fine gun!"

"Yuh dad-blasted, buzzard-nosed ole—" Doc's voice sputtered into silence. He couldn't think of the right word.

MacLoyd's grin broadened. Any time he could make Doc so mad he couldn't talk, he felt like a cat with a pound of liver.

"Figured I might swap this here rifle fer a certain fiddle," he went on happily. "Want a little to boot, though."

Doc felt a shudder run through him. So that was MacLoyd's game—another play for Doc's beloved red-gold fiddle. For years the sheriff had had his heart set on that fiddle, and for as long Doc had managed to keep it out of MacLoyd's clutches.

Doc's white whiskers bristled.

"Let me tell yuh somethin'—"

Doc never got MacLoyd told, for just at that moment, the batwing slammed inward.

"Freeze!" a voice bellowed.

A long, wide, heavy-set man stood just inside the door. He wore an old gray ten-gallon hat, held a six-gun in a big fist, and had his face completely hidden behind a mask fashioned from an old flour sack. Two eyes glittered through two holes in the sack. The eyes left no doubt in anyone's mind as to the man's intentions. Six pairs of hands leaped into the air.

Doc shot a glance at Sheriff MacLoyd. The sheriff's thin face had turned a pasty white. He didn't have his old Colt.

The outlaw swept his gray hat from his hooded head and set it on the floor.

"All right, gents," he rasped. "Start emptyin' yore pockets into my hat." His gun jabbed toward barber Pully. "You first, mister!"

The barber came forward on shaking legs and dropped his haircut take for the day, eight quarters, into the hat.

The gun centered on old Doc Swap.

Puffing a little, the oldster sidled up to the hat and began to turn his pockets wrong-side-out. Doc scorned money as a means of barter and never bothered carrying the stuff. His pockets were as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, except for one. In that one nestled Ham Brady's trick knife.

Pulling out the knife, Doc's fingers acci-

dently touched the button. The blade flipped open and whacked sharply into his thumb. Blood spurted. Doc, cussing into his whiskers, dropped the knife into the hat and turned away.

"No money?" the bandit barked.

Doc shook his head, and the man made a few blistering remarks that fairly stood the oldster's whiskers on end.

In turn, Jed Williams, Deacon Plumb, Sheriff MacLoyd and Goop Gibson did their bit toward filling the hat. The outlaw emptied his ill-gotten loot into pockets and slapped the gray hat back over his hooded head.

"Don't nobody be in any hurry about stickin' his nose outside," he said coolly, and made a dignified exit.

Jed Williams, who'd lost a sizeable roll of bills, began to cuss colorfully. Deacon Plumb and Goop Gibson turned cold eyes on Sheriff MacLoyd, who tried to make himself as small as possible.

"If," Goop Gibson said, pointing a shaking fat finger at the sheriff, "we had us a lawman who ain't afraid of his own shadow, things like this wouldn't happen!"

MACLOYD ran a tongue over grayish lips.

"If I'd have had my old hogleg—" he began.

"I'm athinkin' that if this here stick-up gent ain't apprehended and our property recovered, Bluff County will have a new sheriff!" Deacon Plumb, the commissioner, cut in.

Doc didn't say anything. After all—what was a knife and a cut thumb? He gave MacLoyd a wide, whisker-rimmed grin and waddled through the batwing. Except for not getting the rifle, it had been a very enjoyable evening—not that Doc believed in hold-ups. And not that he wanted his old friendly-enemy to lose his sheriff's job. But it was mighty nice to see MacLoyd do a little sweating.

Passing the alley, he picked up the rag doll, carried it to where his covered wagon stood beside his red barn, and put the doll into the wagon along with his collection of "swappin'" goods.

He knew that tomorrow he'd head for Sugar Valley on a "swappin' spree." Nesters were beginning to settle up there and nesters were good traders. Doc had a problem to solve—how to get the rifle from MacLoyd. That would take considerable scheming, and he did his best thinking when he was swapping.

That night he dreamed about a gray hat. It belonged to an outlaw and was bulging with loot. There was something peculiar about that hat, but before Doc could make out what it was, the owner came after him with a Pennsylvania rifle fifteen feet long.

The oldster woke up in a cold sweat. All the rest of the night that dream kept bothering him. He reckoned that now he had two problems to solve—the rifle and the hat.

Next afternoon, Doc pulled his team of matched bays to a halt in front of a new log cabin at the side of the Sugar Creek Trail. He felt a tingle of expectancy. Nothing he liked better than to test his swapping skill with strangers.

His fat fist rapped against the plank door. The door opened a cautious six inches, and a woman with a long bony face peered out at his suspiciously.

"I don't want to buy nothing!" she said and started to close the door.

The door didn't close. Doc had his foot in it. He swept off his fancy hat and bowed deeply.

"Ain't got nothin' to sell," he said. "I swap fer things."

The woman lifted her nose.

"I don't swap. I'm Mrs. Themistocles Whetstone Zoop."

"Pleased to meet yuh," Doc said. "I'm Doc Swap."

"Aw-ow!" a child bawled and poked her wet face out from behind the woman's skirts.

"What's the matter with her?" Doc asked.

"Rebecca Zenobia has got a contrary streak on today," the woman answered. "When she gets this way, nobody can hush her."

"Aw-ow!" Rebecca Zenobia Zoop wailed.

"Just a minute," Doc said.

He hurried to the wagon and came back with the big rag doll. The little girl's eyes widened, and she held out her arms.

When Doc left Mrs. Themistocles Whetstone Zoop's new cabin, he no longer owned a rag doll, but he did have a roll of copper picture frame wire, one dozen smoked link sausages, a sizeable piece of harness leather, part of a bottle of highly perfumed hair oil, and a book on "How to Get Rich," which he'd persuaded the woman to throw in to-boot. Doc was a great "to-boot" swapper. And quite a hand to read.

That evening he was sitting near his campfire on the bank of Sugar Creek, digesting four sausages and reading the book when two rannies from the Double O rode up.

The skinnier of the two riders slid to the ground. Under his mop of wild red hair his lean face looked worried.

Doc nodded and closed the book on a fat finger.

"Bet yuh boys is goin' to a dance," he said.

The redhead nodded and ran big fingers through his flaming mop.

The second rider, short and fat and all mouth, grinned.

"Red's worried about his girl," he said. "Afraid he's got competition. A dude is cuttin' in."

"Dudes is bad competition," Doc agreed, and saw the lanky cowboy's face turn slightly pale.

THE old swapper fished out the bottle of hair oil, uncorked it and held it under Red's long nose.

"Reckon this'd kind of purty yuh up. Slick down yore hair and make yuh smell like a bo-kay."

Red's face brightened.

"How much fer that stuff, Doc?"

"Ain't for sale, but I reckon we could swap something."

"Hey!" the fat cowpoke yelled. "Look here! A book on how to get rich. Mebbe if I was to read this, I wouldn't have to work no more? What do you think, Doc?"

"It looks like a powerful good book," Doc admitted, careful not to commit himself.

The two cowboys rode away, one with a bottle of hair oil, the other with a book. In exchange Doc had a pair of boots that needed half-soling, a pack-knife, a button hook, some fishing tackle, an old saddle blanket, and a brass finger ring to-boot.

Doc cut a pair of soles out of the harness leather and began to repair the boots. As he worked, he took inventory mentally. For a lucky horseshoe that had been given to him, he had a roll of copper wire, a pair of boots, a jackknife, a button hook, some fishing tackle, a saddle blanket, a ring, four smoked sausages under his belt and eight more to eat.

Not bad—but he wasn't exactly happy. MacLoyd still owned the rifle. And as yet, Doc hadn't been able to forget the dream about the bandit's gray hat.

Before turning in for the night, he set the fishing tackle in a quiet pool of the nearby creek.

After a breakfast of crispy fried sunperch, Doc was in the process of hooking his matched bays to the covered wagon when two men came riding up on weary ponies. They were MacLoyd's occasional deputies, Ham Brady and Joe Bean.

Ham brushed the tail of the squirrel skin cap out of his eyes and eyed Doc maliciously.

"Doc, I ain't had nothin' but bad luck ever since you swapped me this durn hoss-shoe."

"Do tell!" Doc said, looking grieved.

"It got mixed up with my sack of fine cut," Ham went on. "Took a chaw and like to busted out my front teeth."

He slid to the ground, tossed the horseshoe at Doc's feet and spat disgustedly.

"Didn't help me remember where I got that rag doll, nuther," he added.

Joe Bean slid his long carcass out of the saddle. Joe was young, always hungry and a fancy dresser.

"Old MacLoyd's had us out all night, lookin' for that jasper who held up the Palace," he said. "I could eat the hind wheel off a locomotive if it was baked to a crisp."

Ham cussed unhappily.

"How MacLoyd can expect us to find this jasper when nobody knows what he looks like is more'n I can say."

"Deacon Plumb and old man Williams are runnin' the sheriff ragged," Joe went on. "Doc, could you spare us a bite of grub?"

Doc felt a warm glow moving over him. He grinned widely.

"Speakin' of food," he said, "I've got smoked sausage."

"Gosh-a'mity!" Joe Bean croaked. "Ketch me before I faint!"

The deputies didn't have much in the way of "swappin'" goods, but Doc fed them anyway. Joe had an empty leather pocketbook, a mouth harp, and a deck of marked playing cards.

Ham began to dig into his saddle pack, which was a bulky affair tied and packed very securely.

"Ain't right sure what's in it," he said. "Can't seem to remember when I looked last."

He opened the pack, and his bleary eyes bugged.

"Heavens to hoss radish!" he wheezed. "Dishes! Now I remember where I got that rag doll. Me and that feller I had a drink with went to a carnival. I won the doll and

these dishes in a shootin' gallery."

Later, when the two deputies rode away, they were well filled and quite happy. Doc no longer had smoked sausages, but he did have a set of glass dishes, a pocketbook, a mouth harp, a deck of cards, the lucky horseshoe, and a generous supply of Ham's fine cut chawin' tobacco.

The old swapper climbed into his covered wagon and drove on into the valley, his round face puckering into a frown. The Pennsylvania rifle seemed as far from his rock fireplace as ever. The only consolation he had was that MacLoyd had landed in hot water up to his neck.

HE TURNED a sharp corner and jerked the bays to a stop. A sad looking, shaggy haired, store-clothed young man sat in the thin shade of a wind-twisted cottonwood, staring blankly into space. An equally sad looking horse stood nearby, chewing halfheartedly at a sunflower. The young man's gear lay strewn about on the sandy ground.

The young man glanced up, sighed wearily and said nothing.

Doc was suddenly all sympathy. And curiosity. He climbed down from his wagon and approached the stranger.

The young man unfolded himself and towered to a good six feet above his number twelve boots. He held out a hand that matched the boots in size.

"I'm Doc Pillar," he said. "Inventor of Doc Pillar's magic box. Dispenser of Doc Pillar's Wonder Pills."

Doc shook hands and winced at the young man's grip.

"I'm Doc Swap," he said.

The young man sighed and eased himself back to the ground.

"So you and me is in the same racket," he observed sadly. "Personally, I'm sick of this doctorin' business."

"Do tell?" Doc mumbled, and sat down beside him.

"A fake, Doc, that's what I am," Pillar moaned. "My magic box ain't nothin' more'n a contraption I rigged up to fool people with. It wouldn't cure a blister. And my pills is made out of bread dough."

He dug under an assortment of odds and ends and came up with a small black box with a crank on one side, a dial on top, and two copper handles attached by wires to the box. He shoved the handles into Doc's fat hands and set the dial.

"See," he explained. "I have my patient hold them handles, then I turn the crank. The jigger makes electricity. The patient feels it. The more I turn the dial, the more he feels. I tell people this box can cure anything, but I ain't a very good liar. People catch on, and the first thing you know, I'm on my way to a new town."

The man spun the crank, and Doc felt a tingle shoot up through his arms. He was reminded of the time back East when he sat on what was called a hot-seat. He'd about jumped out of his skin that time.

"If I was to turn this dial up full blast, it'd knock that fancy hat clean off your head," Pillar said.

Doc hastily dropped the copper handles.

The fake doctor grinned and leaned back against the tree.

"What's your racket, Doc? Pills? Rubbin'? Indian herbs?"

Doc Swap thought rapidly. Some inner instinct made him want the little black box. Just why he wanted it, he wasn't sure. He fished around in his pockets and found the deck of cards and spread them out before the young man.

"Marked," he said. "With a little practise, yuh can tell what the other feller's holdin'.

He laid the pint-sized horseshoe on the fanned out cards.

"This is fer luck," he added blandly. "A man can do right well with a combination like this."

The young man sat up and blinked rapidly.

"You doin' all right, Doc?" he asked.

Doc nodded.

"Can't complain. Don't miss many meals."

A few minutes later, Doc Swap and Doc Pillar parted company. Doc Pillar had acquired the tools for another profession—marked cards and a lucky horseshoe. Doc Swap had the magic box, a dog-eared medical book—and a large bottle of sugar-coated dough pills to-boot.

Doc drove on to Ed Lunt's homestead, arriving just in time for dinner. Besides being the skinniest woman in Bluff County, Mrs. Lunt was one of the best cooks.

Just as Doc stepped up on the front porch, Mrs. Lunt's determined voice drifted through the screen door.

"I reckon you'll eat out of a fryin' pan and like it," she said. "If you hadn't been so shiftless, you'd have fixed that table leg so's

it wouldn't have busted and spilled the dishes."

"Now, Ma!" Ed Lunt protested. "How was I to know that leg was gettin' all set to bust?"

GRINNING shyly behind his whiskers, Doc retreated to his covered wagon. Five minutes later when Mrs. Lunt answered a brisk knock at her front door, she found old Dac Swap, a smile on his innocent baby face, a box of gleaming glass dishes in his arms.

Her lips tightened knowingly, but her eyes held a wishful gleam. Doc didn't miss the gleam.

"I ain't in no tradin' mood," she said stiffly. "Especially for dishes."

"Wasn't thinkin' of tradin'," Doc said blandly. "I was just drivin' by an' says to myself, 'Now, take Mrs. Lunt. There's a woman what appreciates nice things.' So I stopped to let you see these dishes I got for my own use."

Mrs. Lunt ran a wistful finger over a gleaming plate.

"They are right pretty," she admitted grudgingly.

"Beautiful!" Doc smiled. "I'm plumb proud of 'em. Well, guess I'd better be on my way. Tell Ed hello fer me."

He turned and started briskly back toward his wagon.

Mrs. Lunt sighed heavily.

"All right, Doc," she called. "You win. Come in an' look around. Maybe we can do some swappin'."

For the dishes and the boots, Doc got a tasty dinner, two quarts of home-canned peaches, a runty pig, and a rickety old cane-bottom chair to-boot.

As he drove away from the Lunt homestead, he checked over his accumulations: copper wire, jackknife, button hook, fishing tackle, saddle blanket, brass ring, pocketbook, mouth harp, several chaws of fine cut, a magic box, a pottle of pills, a warm dinner under his belt, two quarts of peaches, a pig and an old chair. Not bad—but not good. MacLoyd still owned the rifle. And Doc hadn't been able to forget the dream about the gray hat.

A horseman jogged up from behind. Sheriff MacLoyd. Doc didn't miss the worried look on the sheriff's sweat-streaked, bony face. It made him feel mighty good, not that he wanted MacLoyd to lose out being sheriff, or anything like that. But it was nice to see him stew.

"Sometimes I think I'll quit sheriffin'," MacLoyd spat. "Got to take up some easy way of makin' a livin'."

"Like stickin' yore buzzard beak into other people's business?" Doc asked.

The sheriff's face turned an angry pink.

"Some day," he began viciously, "yuh're goin' to open that big mouth of yourn once too often an'—"

The sheriff's jaw went slack. Doc had reached back into his wagon and come up with a quart of peaches. Peaches were MacLoyd's weakness.

Eventually the sheriff got the peaches, but Doc got the sheriff's badly-stretched suspenders, a rope halter, a red-bandana—and to-boot, a brilliant idea!

As soon as MacLoyd was out of sight, Doc pulled up under a clump of cedars and set to work. The idea had struck him like lightning out of a clear sky, and it had to do with the magic box, the copper wire, the old chair, the sheriff and Doc's hot-seat experience back East.

Doc grinned happily. He'd rig up a hot-seat that would make MacLoyd jump like a snake spooked bronc.

With the button hook and the jacknife, he threaded copper wire all through the cane bottom seat of the chair. Then he laid the ends of the wires across the brown grass to the magic box and wound them to the copper handles. This done, he looked hopefully up and down the dusty road. He needed someone for a guinea pig.

A horse and rider emerged from a stir of dust, and Doc's hopes beat high. The rider came nearer and turned out to be the sad-faced Doc Pillar.

The young man rode up and dismounted. Doc took one look at the sad face and forgot the hot-seat idea. Pillar's eyes were black and swollen, and his left cheek was bruised.

He dropped down in the chair, a picture of dispair.

"I'm a failure, Doc," he moaned. "I tried them cards on a feller. He took one look at 'em, tore 'em up, slammed me in the kisser and beat it with my money."

"Do tell!" Doc sympathized.

THEN he remembered the hot-seat, but he felt sorry for the young man and didn't turn the crank on the magic box. He reckoned the young man had had enough

punishment for one day.

"Here I am, hungry and with no profession," Pillar went on. "Reckon I'll go back to bustin' broncs, Doc."

"Hungry, yuh say?" Doc dug out the fishing tackle. "All yuh got to do to eat is to dig yuh some bait and get busy."

The young man rode toward Sugar Creek with the fishing tackle. Doc had a black medicine bag, and the lucky horseshoe to-boot.

The old Swapper was leafing through the medical book when Cy Barz rode up. Barz was a big hombre with a fine crop of black whiskers and a slick handled six-gun. He'd drifted into the valley from places unknown.

There was something about the man that Doc had never liked, and looking at him, now, over the top of the book, he felt his dislike grow. Inwardly, he had an idea that Cy Barz would be the wrong man to try the hot-seat on. Sighing, he closed the book on a chapter about concussion of the brain.

Barz slid from his horse, swaggered over to the chair and sat down. Doc sighed again and looked unhappily at the magic box. Vaguely he wondered what he had among his assortment of "swappin'" goods that would interest the big man.

"Nice cozy camp, yuh got," Barz observed, pulling his big hat off his round head. "Comfortable chair. Nice shade. And not a bad lookin' pig—if he was roasted."

Doc's eyes brightened, but he said nothing.

Barz laid his hat on the brown grass, upside down. It was a gray hat. Doc leaned over and glanced down into it. He felt his blood race, and the dream came back to him with a rush. His eyes froze on some brownish spots inside the hat. Blood spots! His mind flashed back to the holdup. The trick knife. The cut thumb. Blood dripping into a hat. This hat!

The old man's eyes jumped up to Cy Barz' face. Barz jerked upright, making the old chair groan. It was as if he'd read Doc's mind, for he snatched up the hat, then laughed shortly. A gun leaped into his fist.

[*Turn page*]

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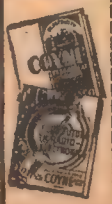

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"Guess I was a mite careless, Doc," he said.

Doc swallowed and felt his blood run cold. Barz wasn't the only one who had been careless, he knew. And now, he reckoned Barz would never let him go. His eyes rested on the lucky horseshoe lying by the black box. Maybe that horseshoe was a downright jinx.

"Before I decide what I'm goin' to do with you, you can dress that pig and roast it," Barz said harshly. "I ain't et since early this mornin'."

Doc shuddered and shifted his gaze to the black box.

"Like coffee with the pig?" he mumbled.

"Sure," the man answered. "Get a wiggle on."

Doc hurried to his wagon and came back with a bag of coffee beans.

"Got to grind some," Doc said.

He stepped over to the black box and turned the dial as far as it would go.

Barz leaned forward in the chair, his gun pointing steadily at Doc's over-sized middle.

"Never seen no grinder like that," he commented.

Doc set the can beside the black box and wrapped pudgy fingers about the crank. If things didn't work out, he was a goner!

He shuddered slightly at the fingers of cold that played up and down his spine.

"This is a new kind of grinder," he said huskily. "First one like it in Bluff County."

He spun the crank. Nothing happened.

"Don't see no coffee comin' out," Barz commented.

Doc's heart sank clear down into his boots. He was doomed. That dad-blasted horseshoe!

Then his eyes fixed on the dial. Maybe he'd turned it the wrong way. With shaking fingers he moved it back, drew a deep breath and spun the crank.

Cy Barz let out a blood curdling screech. His gun exploded and leaped out of his hand. The man himself rose straight up out of the chair and came down with a thud. The old cane seat gave way under his weight, and the man jackknifed and wedged into the framework of the seat.

DOC'S fingers wrapped around the iron horseshoe. It was his only weapon. He hit Barz once. Once was enough. The huge outlaw went limp, and Doc tied him securely with the rope halter.

Before he headed back for Dry Bluffs, he went through the man's saddle bags. Everything Barz had taken at The Palace, including the trick knife, was in the bags. Plus a bottle of sugar-coated bread pills. Doc knew then who had given the sad-faced Pillar the black eyes.

That evening old Doc Swap pulled up in front of the Dry Bluffs jail. He was as happy as a kid with a pocket full of jellybeans. Whistling "Little Brown Jug," he waddled up the three wooden steps and barged into the two-by-four office.

MacLoyd sat behind his desk, his bony face lined with worry. His eyes came up to Doc's smiling face, and narrowed into angry slits.

"Stop that whistlin'!" he bellowed. "Can't yuh see I've got troubles?"

Doc had picked up the old Pennsylvania rifle. It was a beautiful gun, well preserved, copper trimmed, skilfully engraved.

MacLoyd leaped to his feet.

"Put down that gun, you old toad!"

Doc grinned broadly and cradled the rifle in the crook of his fat left arm.

"Heard of a feller once what traded hisself out of a bad spot," he said blandly. "Seems this feller was a old busted-down sheriff what had a gun that another feller wanted. This sheriff says to the feller, 'I'll make a deal with yuh. Yuh git me out of this jam, and yuh can have the gun.'"

Large drops of sweat stood out on MacLoyd's bony face. He sank heavily into his protesting swivel chair.

"All right, Doc," he said feebly. "Yuh got me acrost a barrel. I know when I'm bested. It's yore move."

"Well, since yuh put it that way, just foller me," Doc said cheerfully.

The beautiful old gun cradled in his arm, Doc led MacLoyd out to the covered wagon and turned Cy Barz and his ill-gotten loot over to the strong arm of the law.

"Looks like it's goin' to be another fine evenin' fer takin' a walk," Doc said innocently.

MacLoyd snorted, collared his prisoner and marched him toward the jail.

Old Doc Swap climbed up into the wagon, clucked to his bays and headed for home. That rifle would sure look mighty nice, hanging above his native rock fireplace. And above the gun, he reckoned he'd hang that lucky horseshoe.

Softly he began to whistle "Little Brown Jug."

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

The show toured around the world. Three years later, Will landed in San Francisco and made his way home to what by then was Oklahoma. Still busted.

Show Business in His Blood

Show business was in Will's blood by now. There was Indian blood in him also. His father was one-eighth Cherokee, his mother one-fourth Cherokee. One of Will's quips was:

"That made me three-sixteenths cigar store Indian. My ancestors didn't come over on the Mayflower. They met the boat."

He drifted around the country in Wild West shows for a few seasons, and finally hit New York. Most folks remember him as the cowboy star at Zeigfeld's Follies. But lots happened before that.

His real start in New York was "a dumb act" in a supper club. From there he drifted to the Follies.

"Killing time with a lasso while the gals changed costumes," is the way he described his role.

The Audience Laughed

At a performance one evening, as he whirled his lasso, Will said:

"A rope's all right. If it isn't around your neck."

He was surprised when the audience laughed. He tried an occasional crack after that. It brightened up the show, so Zeigfeld let the "dumb cowboy" talk when he wanted to.

It was along about then that Will started what was, in a way New York's first gossip column. Before the show he'd find out the names of celebrities to be in the audience and where they had seats. He had a spotlight rigged. As he did rope tricks, the spotlight singled out his victims and he started joshing them.

He prodded around and found out things about them they didn't know anybody knew. The act was a sensation. Quickly the "dumb cowboy" became the star of the show. That was in 1914.

His Movie Career Begins

He was popular with the public and with fellow-performers one season after another but his act might have died out, as acts do. But he met up with Rex Beach, who persuaded him to go to Hollywood and get into movies. Silent movies, in those days.

[*Turn page*]

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"Shucks, I can't act," Will told Sam Goldwyn at his first interview.

"Go ahead and prove it," said the movie magnate.

"Well, I can act, maybe. I'll prove I'm the worst actor in the world," he told Goldwyn.

Will made a Western picture. It was a success.

He made another, made more.

My Meeting With Rogers

It was about that time, gals and galluses, that I first met up with movie actor Will Rogers. It was during the making of a "horse opera" at one of the studios. Will had acquired a reputation as a ready wit. But Hollywood reputations often are founded on the imagination of some publicity man, nothing else.

So I suspected that this plain, homely cow terror was just another Hollywood phony. I decided to find out for myself. A writer friend of mine had a set of Rogers photographs in various garbs. So I handed them to him, asking if he would supply captions for an article my friend was writing. An article on dress styles.

Will agreed and sat down on a fuse box in back of the set, between takes. He wet the stub of a pencil to his lips and screwed up his face and on the back of one photo that showed him in dashing evening clothes he scribbled:

"I'd rather see a man wear one clean shirt than two dirty ones."

He went on through the bunch of them, scribbling an amusing caption on each. I believe that was the beginning of another step in Will Rogers' brilliant career. He was learning that he could write swift, smashing humor. Not many years later, this boy that had gotten as far as Guffey's fourth reader was offered an honorary degree in a great university. An honor he refused, saying:

"All of us are ignorant, but not about the same things."

Swift Success

The Rogers star rose fast after his Hollywood successes. He wrote, made radio addresses, became a celebrated speaker, toured the world, hob-nobbed with famous people, became an adviser to political leaders, was even talked about as a Presidential possibility.

He was never awed by anybody. After meeting the royal family of England, he wrote:

"They'd be just as good as anybody else if they had an equal chance."

In his laughing way, Will could get to the

nub of any problem and in a way that made folks think. His news comments were syndicated around the world, and usually started with:

"I see by the papers . . ."

Sometimes his views were piercing, and once the New York Times printed a heading over Will's column that said:

"Rogers' opinions are his own and are not to be construed as a policy of The Times."

Next day in Will's column there appeared something that made The Times' editors blink. He wrote:

"Would like to state I am in no way responsible for the editorial or political policy of this paper. I allow them free reign in their opinion."

One time he made a radio address to England. Instead of preaching the good neighbor idea in the usual boring way, he said:

"America and England could never go to war. We're too funny to each other."

When Mothers' Day was founded, he wrote:

"It's too bad we had to be almost forced by law to do something about Mother."

On another occasion he was speaking on a broadcast from Sacramento, California, where the State Legislature had just adjourned because of lack of funds.

A short time before Oregon's State Capitol had burned.

"Lots of States," Will said, "burn down their Capitols to get rid of their politicians, but California's got the best way. Nothing dampens men's public spirit so much as cutting off their salaries."

Yes Man's Land

After World War I, when the phrase "No Man's Land" was in vogue, Will described Hollywood as "Yes Man's Land."

He outgrew the silent screen as his writing increased. And his writing improved rapidly in quality. The old wit was always there. But behind it was a greater amount of wisdom. Will Rogers was on his way to great things, greater than he ever had touched on in his career.

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He bought a ranch in California, invested in much land, some of which he left to the public as a state park. Will Rogers became a rich man. But he never looked or acted any

[*Turn page*]

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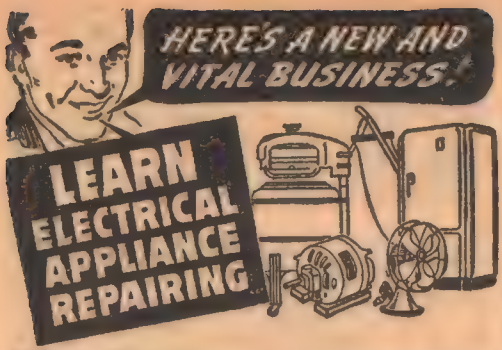

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differently than in his days of a broke, wandering Wild West cowboy.

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He developed a great enthusiasm for flying, became a close friend of famous flyers and was on a round-the-world hop with Wiley Post when their plane fell on the icy northern shores of the continent and snuffed out the life of this Oklahoma cowboy who was only on the threshold of a career that would have lightened the sorrows of this torn and unhappy world to the immeasureable benefit of every common man.

His going left an empty place in their hearts that has never been filled.

Nature's Nobleman

But he is not forgotten and I'm hoping that he never will be. Kindly, generous, hard-working, as simple in all his tastes as he was in dress and manner, Will Rogers was truly Nature's nobleman. He was so completely without pretense that he couldn't speak or write correct, precise English.

"Syntax, what's that?" he asked an editor who once complained of his loose grammar and bad spelling. "It sounds like something mighty bad."

There's a saying that great men spring up to fill great needs. If that's true, maybe someday, when the need is greatest, out of the West there'll ride another Will Rogers to light the way to old, simple truths that are lost from sight in the world's hurry and deceits! *Adios*, folks, until next time!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THERE was trouble down in the Neuces River country of Texas. A dead man lay with the rain beating on him and washing the blood from his crimsoned shirt. The deep gouged hoofprints of his stolen horse herd filled slowly with water.

All through this flat, swampy Neuces country, horses were being run off and ranchers who intercepted the bandits, ruthlessly shot. A U. S. Marshal sent down to investigate, mysteriously vanished.

Washington fumed. A message burned the wires to Captain William McDowell of the Texas Rangers. And when he received it, Captain McDowell burned with an even hotter flame.

"Too old to handle it, am I?" he growled. "I'll show em!"

He had a sure fire method of "showing 'em." He sent for Jim Hatfield.

"Washington wants to know can we handle this," he raged. "If not they're moving in. A Federal marshal has disappeared. Jim, I'm depending on you! We've got to show them that Texas can enforce its own laws without Federal help!"

Jim Hatfield made no brags.

"The Rangers'll handle it," he said quietly.

Shortly after, he rode into Whichway, the river town which seemed to be the focus of the trouble. He made inquiries at the local gossip center, the saloon, and found that an unemployed rider might get work at Adam Caruthers AC ranch. As always, Jim Hatfield concealed his identity, working under cover to gather information.

It was night when he started out from Whichway for the AC ranch. The moon was shining and the stars were bright in the sky. The road climbed up out of the river valley and mounted the hills and ridges beyond. Looking back, Jim Hatfield could see the yellow lights of the saloon and the other few poor shacks of Whichway. Then he saw something else.

From near the river a light flashed. It flashed again, a short flash, then a longer one.

"Looks like a signal lantern," Hatfield thought.

Signalling to whom? He scanned the en-

[*Turn page*]

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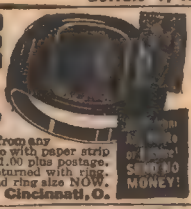

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tire dark rim of the horizon. And up on the ridges to the north he saw an answering flash. There could be no mistake about it, this light too flashed in short and long intervals.

From the ford to the hills. "Interestin'," Hatfield mused. Too interesting to pass up. He turned Goldy back and came silently into Whichway again. Near the river he concealed himself and waited with the patience of an Indian. An hour passed and he began to wonder if he had been making mountains out of molehills, or lanterns out of fireflies. Then came the click of hoofs on stone.

In a few minutes a cavalcade of horses began to flow past Jim Hatfield's concealed position. Armed men drove them. A voice called softly:

"All clear, boys. Push 'em through."

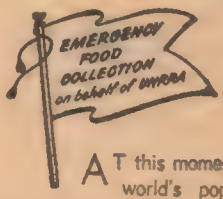
Stolen horses, without a doubt. Hatfield felt a thrill at having stumbled so quickly on the actual operations of the gang he sought. But he could not act at once. There were too many for a lone man, even a Ranger, to tackle alone. Or so he thought. The choice, however, was not with him.

A mustang spooked at Goldy's scent, a rider came galloping and saw Hatfield's dim shape in the brush.

"Hey, boys! Here's somebuddy hid in the bushes!"

The outlaw's carbine swung up. Jim Hat-

WILL YOU GIVE THAT THEY MAY LIVE?



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field had no choice. With the blinding, yet accurate speed of which he was capable, he drew his Colt, the hammer back under his thumb as the weapon cocked by its own rising weight.

The outlaw caught Ranger lead full in the breast. His rifle blasted and Hatfield heard the shriek of the bullet and its quick zip as it cut the bushes and plugged into the soft ground. The wind blew acrid powder smoke into his flared nostrils.

In a moment armed men were driving down on him from all sides. He caught up Goldy. Another outlaw blocked his retreat, opened fire. Hatfield shot again. The gunman spun into a slump and his horse carried him away, as he sagged in the saddle.

Hatfield roared away. But he was at a real disadvantage. He did not know the terrain and he could only think of outriding his pursuers, letting Goldy pick the way. There was no trail. Goldy crashed through the brush, picking his own openings.

A huge cliff loomed up ahead. It was studded with dwarf pines and bush, with sheer outcroppings of rock.

"Can't make it up there, Goldy," the ranger muttered.

They swung right. The sorrel's hoofs began to suck mud. The moon gleamed on patches of swamp water. Goldy began to sink deeper with each step. They were trapped between the swamp and the unclimbable rock wall.

The scattered mustang herd was here. The horses had stopped running and were grazing. Hatfield had an idea. He swiftly dismounted and stripped his gear from the golden sorrel.

"Go on, Goldy," he whispered. "Join the herd. But keep away from them outlaws, they're plumb bad company for a well brought up horse!"

Lugging his saddle, Jim Hatfield dashed for the foot of the cliff. He dropped his gear into a deep hole between the boulders and then crawled into a similar space himself. Panting, his Colt in hand, he waited for the search that he knew would come. And in a moment, he heard the voices of the outlaws.

Exciting? Plenty! But we won't spoil your fun by telling you how Jim made out. You can rest assured it was only the first of his narrow squeaks in the action packed, thrilling Jim Hatfield adventure which is featured in

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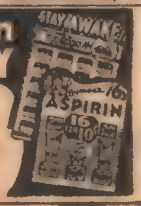

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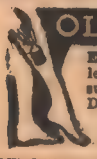

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OUR MAIL BOX

THIS argument about whether author Jackson Cole should allow a little romance to creep into Jim Hatfield's stern life has created quite a storm, amigos. The fur sure is flying. But so far most of you that write in say "no!" loud and furious. For instance:

I can't figure out the reason why some folks want Jim Hatfield to fall in love or marry. What kind of a Ranger would he be if he was being constantly reminded to run home to wife and Junior?
—Luther Davidson, Gastonia, N. C.

Now there's a thought indeed, Luther. But on the other side of the fence:

I don't think it would hurt the stories if Jim Hatfield fell in love and married. It might make him seem more real. But either way the Hatfield stories are good and I'm sure they always will be.
—Arleta Wilson, Paterson, Wash.

And that's only the beginning. From Waupun, Wisconsin, a gent writes:

Don't let Jim Hatfield get married and spoil the stories for us readers. I like him the way he is.

And he signs his name, Hopalong Cassidy. Is that on the level, partner? Is that your name or are you kidding us?

I agree with the readers who think Jim Hatfield should fall in love. It would be a little different from the other stories anyhow.
—Robt. McPhee, Kent, Wash.

The thing I like about the Hatfield stories is that they have a different ending than most stories which end with Love!
—Mrs. J. D. Vance, Houston, Tex.

Let's have more FIST FIGHTS instead of gunplay. And keep women out of the stories, they make it mushy.
—Paul Karpiscak, New York, N. Y.

If Jim Hatfield would fall in love with magazine would be just about perfect.
(Miss) Ardith Gurley, Coraleen, N. C.
Edward Gurley, New Dale, N. C.

That's the way it goes, folks. Author Jackson Cole right now is a little dizzy looking back and forth at these two camps, but he's enjoying the fracas anyhow. Now here's a couple of letters with different problems.

residents of Texas allowed to carry sixshooters public as long as they are in plain sight?
—*Randall Perkins, Hardyville, Ky.*

In most places, no. Texas does not have a Sullivan law like New York, which forbids carrying a pistol under any conditions without a permit, which is darned hard to get. But there are numerous restrictions having to do with the locality and size of the place you live and it would be wise to check with the authorities in Austin before getting any ideas.

I have been reading your magazine for several years and get quite a kick out of it even though it is fiction. However, quite often a name or description of a locality hits a bell in my memory. I would like to see Mr. Cole come out with a *true* story occasionally, at least one based on facts with real names, etc. I have been wandering around Texas off and on since 1888 and have seen the rangers in action many times as an interested observer.
—*George A. Robinson, Marshall, Tex.*

This is an interesting letter to us because we have a companion magazine, THE RIO KID WESTERN, which does base its stories on true facts and actual historical characters. In recent issues the true facts about Billy The Kid and Pat Garrett formed the basis for one story and such men as Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday—even Mark Twain, appear in its stories frequently.

If you like that type of story, Mr. Robinson, we recommend THE RIO KID WESTERN to you, heartily. TEXAS RANGERS is pure fiction though of course the author will occasionally use a bit of history to tie his story to.

Well, that about uses up our space, *amigos.* Join the fun and get in your comments in the great battle of Hatfield versus love. We'll be glad to hear from you and other readers will enjoy reading your notes. Just address The Editor, Texas Rangers, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And remember a postcard is as welcome as a sealed letter. Thanks, everybody! *Adios!*

—THE EDITOR.

Thrilling true picture-stories of Hollywood hero James Stewart—novelist James Fenimore Cooper—master craftsman Paul Revere—trail blazer Charles Goodnight—song writer Irving Berlin and others in the August issue of

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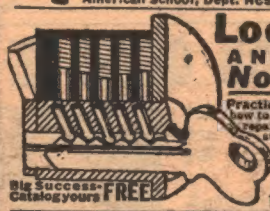

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When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you—then you'll be astounded at how **short** a time it takes *"Dynamic Tension"* to **GET RESULTS!**

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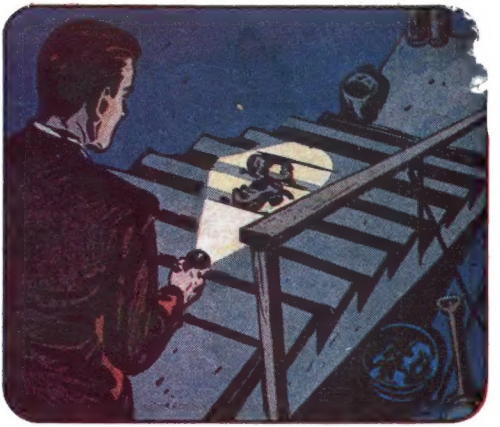
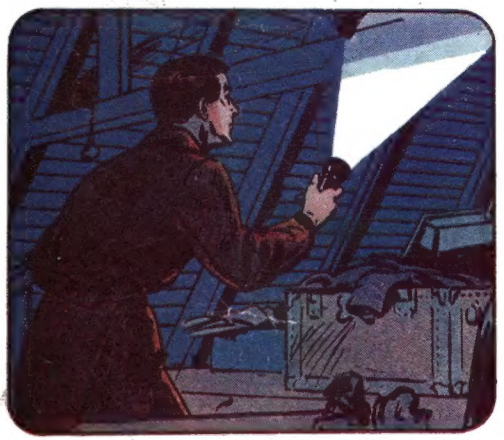
☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A.

How to Avoid these "BOOBY TRAPS" in your home!

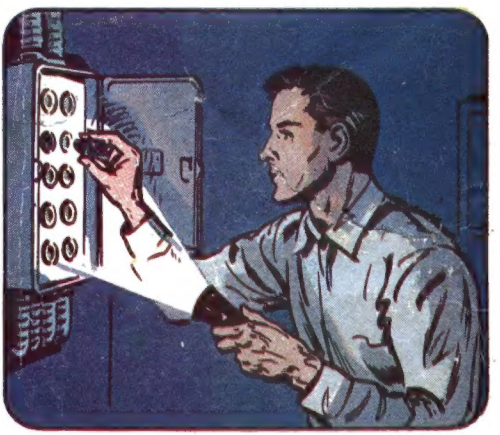
What you can't see CAN hurt you —says the National Safety Council



1 About 5,000,000 Americans are injured every year *at home*—33,500 fatally! Largest single cause: *falling.* A roller skate on a dark staircase; shin-catching obstructions: these can be lethal "booby traps." To avoid, carry your "Eveready" flashlight in dark areas.



2 Clear all obstacles away. Linoleum or carpeting should be tacked down firmly. In attic or basement, pack all loose objects in noninflammable boxes stored against the walls. Don't rely on *your* knowledge of where obstacles are located—the next person may not know.



3 Know *in advance* where your fuse box, main water and gas valves, etc., are located; be sure you have a clear path to them. Armed with your "Eveready" flashlight, you can approach without fumbling. Be sure loose wires are so placed that you won't trip over them.

4 Keep your "Eveready" flashlight always in the same convenient place—so you can readily locate it when needed. Keep it filled with "Eveready" batteries – they're again available.

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